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RUTH THE GLEANER
—
ESTHER THE QUEEN

WILLIAM M. TAYLOR, D.D.

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RUTH THE GLEANER

ESTHER THE QUEEN

BY

WILLIAM M. TAYLOR, D.D., LL.D

AUTHOR OF

"MOSES THE LAW-GIVER," "PAUL THE MISSIONARY"

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PREFACE.

In adding another to the volumes on Bible biographies which have been so widely and generously received by the Christian public, it is unnecessary to say anything as to the method which I have adopted. The present work will be found to possess the same characteristics as those already issued, its only peculiarity being that it deals with two women whose names are dear to the hearts alike of Jews and Christians. I have put them together into one volume mainly for the sake of convenience; though there is a certain link of association between them, inasmuch as the Book of Ruth describes the experiences of a Gentile widow in the midst of Jewish surroundings; and the Book of Esther describes those of a Jewish orphan in a Gentile city.

The preparation of these Lectures was peculiarly interesting to myself, and they are given to the press in the hope that they may contribute to the promotion of that revival of Biblical Study which, during

recent years, has been so gratifying to every lover of the Scriptures.

That He, without Whose blessing all human efforts must be vain, may deign to use these pages for the advancement of His glory in the temporal and spiritual welfare of man is "my heart's desire and prayer."

WILLIAM M. TAYLOR.

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RUTH THE GLEANER

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(2) Shavings in Bk of Keith Henry Morehouse 46
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RUTH THE GLEANER.

I.

EMIGRATION AND BEREAVEMENT.

RUTH i. 1–5.

THIS little book of four chapters is unique among the treasures of the Word of God. It is unlike every other portion of Holy Scripture; and yet it has on it the stamp of inspiration which is common to them all. Exquisite in its pastoral simplicity, and valuable for the glimpses which it gives us into the common life of the Jewish people at the time to which it refers, it is also deeply interesting to the devout reader, from its relation to one who was an ancestress of David, and of David's greater Son, and from the lessons of love and constancy and purity and integrity which it so abundantly suggests. Withal, however, it is questionable whether it receives from us the amount of attention to which it is entitled. It is said that Dr. Franklin was once in the company of

several ladies of the English nobility, when the conversation turned upon pastoral poetry. The ladies took a considerable part in the discussion, and after hearing their criticisms on various authors, the doctor offered to read the translation of a pastoral for their amusement. He read, with a few verbal alterations, the Book of Ruth. They were enraptured, pronounced it the finest they had ever heard from any language, and insisted upon knowing whose it was. Imagine their confusion when he gravely told them that he had read it from the Bible. I do not vouch for the truth of the story, though I found it in a reliable place enough;[1] but though few of us, perhaps, could be so thoroughly imposed on now, I question whether any of us could give at once a clear and concise account of the story that is here told, brief as it is, and I am sure that very few of us have bestowed upon it that measure of attention which is needful for the bringing out from it the lessons which it was designed to teach. We may, therefore, spend very profitably, as well as pleasantly, a few Sabbath evenings in studying it together.

In modern editions of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Book of Ruth is placed among the Hagiographa,

[1] *The Biblical Treasury*, by J. Comper Gray, vol. iii. p. 171. I find, however, in the preface to *The Beautiful Gleaner*, by the late Rev. William Braden, that the same story is told of Dr. Samuel Johnson, and on internal grounds it is, perhaps, more likely to be true of him than of Franklin.

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which is the third division of the Old Testament writings, and which consists of the five rolls or Megilloth, the three poetical books (Job, Proverbs, and Psalms), and the two Books of Chronicles. Ruth is one of the Megilloth, of which the others were the Song of Songs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. These books were so called because, for convenient use at the festival on which it was read in the synagogue, each was written on a separate roll. That of Esther was styled Megillah or the roll, by way of eminence, and was read on the Feast of Purim, whose origin it describes. That of Ruth was read at Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks, perhaps because it contains so graphic a delineation of Boaz and his reapers in the harvest field. But this division into separate rolls was probably a mere liturgical arrangement, for the Septuagint, or Greek version of the Old Testament, places Ruth between Judges and 1 Samuel, as we have it in our English Bibles. Some, following the authority of Josephus, have alleged that it was originally incorporated with the Book of Judges. That, however, has been much disputed, and the general opinion now is that it has always been a distinct and separate portion of the Old Testament Canon, and that it is placed where we have it because it forms a fitting introduction to the books which tell of the glory of King David's reign.

The date of its composition cannot be determined with precision. Some have gone so far as to put it

after the Captivity, and would ascribe its authorship to Ezra, or Nehemiah, on the ground of certain Chaldaic forms of expression which they allege they have detected in it. But it is remarkable that these all occur in the reported conversations which the book contains, and not in the narrative portions—a fact which suggests that they were probably due to some peculiarity of dialect not yet satisfactorily accounted for; and in any case they cannot outweigh the great improbability that a book which tells, without extenuation or apology, how a Bethlehemite like Boaz married a Moabitish woman, should be produced at the very time when such alliances were so bitterly denounced by the Jewish leaders. From an examination of the book itself, it seems clear that while it could not have been written earlier than David's day, because it contains two references to David himself, it could not have been composed much, if any, later, else it would have contained the name of Solomon in the genealogical table with which it closes.

Again, the tone of the book throughout is liberal and tolerant to the Gentiles; and part of its design —unconsciously to its author, perhaps, but not the less intentional with God—seems to be to prepare for the time when through the promised Messiah the middle wall of partition between the Jews and other nations should be broken down. Now the reign of David appears to have been the only portion of

Jewish history during which such a spirit towards the Gentiles was shown without any breach of loyalty to Jehovah. David himself in his public administration was "the man according to God's own heart;" and yet, as one has suggestively said, "nothing is more characteristic of him and his time, though it is a characteristic too commonly overlooked, than the fair and easy terms on which he met all foreigners, and the rare fidelity with which friendly aliens clave to his cause, even when it was a losing cause."[1] This fact, therefore, taken in connection with the personal relation of David to the heroine of the story, seems to make it, if not absolutely certain, at least fairly probable that the Book of Ruth was written some time during David's reign, and we know that the Royal Psalmist had contemporaries who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, might have produced such a work. Indeed, there is much in the simple pathos of the parable of the ewe lamb to remind us of the idyllic beauty of the Book of Ruth, and though we have not anywhere met with the opinion, both might well enough have come from the prophet Nathan.

As to the date of the events recorded in this book, all we know is that they happened "in the days when the Judges ruled." But as to how long the time of the Judges lasted, or which of them are particularly referred to in the opening verse of Ruth, we are

[1] Samuel Cox, in *The Expositor*, vol. ii. pp. 8, 9.

again in the dark. For it is not yet settled among critics whether we must regard the Judges as so many magistrates having jurisdiction over the whole land, and ruling consecutively from Othniel to Eli; or whether we must view them as local leaders, each restricted to some one particular neighbourhood, and some of whom may have been contemporaries. Lord Arthur Hervey, for example, believes that Ehud, Gideon, and Jephthah flourished at the same time; while others suppose that the book, up at least to the end of the sixteenth chapter, is to be regarded as a continuous history of events strictly following one another. So, with this diversity of view existing, it is difficult to fix upon any one judge as that under whose administration Boaz lived. But if we may presume that the genealogical table at the end of Ruth is without a break, so far at least as the steps between Boaz and David are concerned, then, as Boaz was the great-grandfather of David, we may not greatly err if we conclude that the incidents here recorded occurred at a date somewhere between one hundred and one hundred and fifty years prior to the days of David.

But now, leaving all preliminaries, let us enter upon the book itself. It tells a short and simple story of family trial deepening into the darkness of repeated bereavement, and then breaking out into the brightness of a joy which is all the more delightful by reason of the gloom that went before. The

household was composed of Elimelech and his wife Naomi, with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Like all Hebrew names, these are significant, but whether we are to consider them as prophetic is quite another matter, though in at least two of the cases their appropriateness is remarkable. Elimelech is "My God the King," or "My God is King." Naomi is "sweet," or, perhaps, an abbreviation for "God is sweet," while Mahlon is "sickliness," and Chilion is "consumption"—names which might well enough have been given to the boys because of the perception in them by their parents of some delicacy of constitution, although other scholars prefer to interpret them as denoting "mildness of disposition" and "beautiful completeness," and one would think that parents would more naturally connect these ideas with their children than seek to perpetuate in their names the associations of physical debility.

The home of this family was in Bethlehem-Judah, so called to distinguish it from another place of the same name in the territory of the tribe of Zebulon, but now needing no such particular designation, since it is to us for ever memorable as the birthplace of the Lord Jesus Christ. It was little among the thousands of Judah, and up till this time, with the exception of the fact that near it was the grave of Rachel, there had been nothing about it to make it specially attractive to the people of the land. Rather it had acquired, if anything, an unenviable notoriety among

the tribes, for out of it had gone the Levite, who had settled as a household priest with Micah in Mount Ephraim, and had been carried off by the Danites to Laish, where he ministered at the altar which these early idolaters had set up.[1] To it, also, had belonged the ill-fated woman whose cruel treatment by the men of Gibeah led to the almost utter extinction of the tribe of Benjamin by the rest of the Israelites. If, therefore, nothing more had been told us concerning it than what is contained in these two strange episodes of Jewish history, which are to be found in the concluding chapters of the Book of Judges, we might have supposed that no good thing could come out of Bethlehem. But how far that would have been from the truth the Book of Ruth makes evident, and we are thereby warned of the danger of judging of the character of a place from one or two particularly unpleasant incidents in its history. Indeed, when we come, in a rural district like that of Bethlehem, and in such an age, upon a quiet, unaffected, simple, pure, and holy home life, like that which is here portrayed, we feel that we must not speak of the days of the Judges too unqualifiedly, as if they had been characterised by constant strife and universal defection from the service of God. And, in any case, after reading this history, we are not so surprised as we otherwise would have been, that the sweet singer of Israel, the "darling" of his people, and the leader

[1] See Judges, chaps. xvii., xviii., xix.

of psalmody for God's children of all succeeding centuries, should have sprung from such a stock.

The town itself is about six miles south of Jerusalem, a little to the east of the road that leads to Hebron. It stands upon the summit and slopes of a narrow ridge which projects eastward from the central chain of the Judæan mountains. The sides of the hill below the town are carefully terraced, and even in modern times they are covered with fertile vineyards; while in the valleys beneath, and on a little plain to the eastward, there are cornfields whose produce, perhaps, gave the name Bethlehem, or House of Bread, to the place with which they are connected. It was well watered, and its other and older name, Ephratah ("the fruitful"), was probably bestowed because of the fertility of the district in the midst of which it stood. But withal it was not proof against the ravages of famine, and at the time at which our story opens that great affliction was upon the people. Perhaps the former and latter rains had not fallen, and the usual consequences had followed. But whatever was the cause, there was "cleanness of teeth" in all the borders of the land; even in the House of Bread there was scarcity, and the pressure was so sore upon Elimelech and his wife that to escape its miseries they went with their two sons to the land of Moab.

The usual resort of the Israelites in time of famine was Egypt; but probably on this occasion the way

thither was barred by insuperable obstacles, and so the members of this household betook themselves to Moab, a district which lay to the south and east of the Dead Sea, and comprised the southern half of the high table-lands which rise above the lake. "On every side it was strongly fortified by nature. On the north was the tremendous chasm of the Arnon. On the west it was limited by the precipices, or, more accurately, the cliffs, which descend almost perpendicularly to the shore of the lake, and are intersected only by one or two steep and narrow passes. Lastly, on the south and east it was protected by a half-circle of hills, which open only to allow the passage of the Arnon and another of the torrents which descend to the Dead Sea."[1] It was, therefore, not very far from Bethlehem. Indeed, its blue mountains are said to be "distinctly visible from the Mount of Olives and the heights above Bethlehem."[2] But it was remarkable for general fertility, for Mr. Grove tells us that "the whole country is undulating, and, after the general level of the plateau is reached, without any serious inequalities; and in this and the absence of conspicuous vegetation has a certain resemblance to the downs in the southern counties of England." And, again, gathering up the different references to it in the prophetical books, he says, "With a metaphor which

[1] Smith's *Bible Dictionary*, *s. v.* Moab.
[2] Morison, on Ruth, in *Pulpit Commentary*.

well expresses at once the pastoral wealth of the country and its commanding, almost regal, position, but which cannot be conveyed in a translation, Moab is depicted as the strong sceptre, the beautiful staff whose fracture will be bewailed by all about him and by all who know him. In his cities we discern a 'great multitude of people' living in 'glory' and in the enjoyment of great 'treasure'; crowding the public squares, the house-tops, and the ascents and descents of the numerous high places and sanctuaries, where the 'priests and princes' of Chemosh or Baal-Peor minister to anxious devotees. Outside the town lie 'the plentiful fields,' luxuriant as the renowned Carmel—the vineyards and gardens of 'summer fruits'—the harvest is being reaped, and the 'hay stored in abundance,' the vineyards and the presses are crowded with peasants gathering and treading the grapes, the land resounds with the clamour of the vintagers."[1]

Here, therefore, there was every probability of finding plenty, and as Elimelech and his family did not stay in Bethlehem until they were utterly impoverished by the famine, but "went out full," they would have the means of availing themselves, for a time at least, of the abundance by which they were surrounded.

But it was an idolatrous land; and the question has been keenly discussed whether or not Elimelech

[1] Smith's *Bible Dictionary*, *ut supra*.

committed sin in leaving the Land of the Covenant for such a territory, even under the pressure of famine. Many blame him very severely, and do not hesitate to affirm that the afflictions which subsequently came upon his household were judgments inflicted on him for his transgression. Others, again, fully vindicate him for his conduct, and grow eloquent over emigration as a remedy for famine. But where the record is silent it does not become us to be dogmatic on such a matter, although every one will recognise how full of spiritual peril it must have been to take two young men like Mahlon and Chilion into the midst of idolatry; and it will be with all a question whether it was wise to run such risk to their souls, simply for the sake of obtaining sustenance for their bodies. The relation of the covenant people to the Promised Land was, of course, peculiar; and the more that was recognised, the more loath would they be for any reason to forsake it for another. Yet, as we see in David's placing of his parents under the care of the King of Moab, exceptional circumstances might be held as justifying a temporary sojourn elsewhere; and it is obvious from the language here employed that Elimelech did not mean to leave Bethlehem "for good and all," but expected to return thither after the famine had ceased.

But whatever may be said regarding his conduct in this instance, we have no hesitation in approving of emigration as one of the best means of furnishing

relief for overcrowded countries, and opening up new fields for industry and enterprise; and it is not without a smile over the commentary which two hundred years have written on his words that we read the remarks of quaint old Thomas Fuller, which we find in his fragment on the Book of Ruth, *apropos* of this question and this land, to the following effect: "Now, if any do demand of me my opinion concerning our brethren which of late left this kingdom to advance a plantation in New England, surely I think as St. Paul said concerning virgins, he had 'received no commandment of the Lord,' so I cannot find any just warrant to encourage men to undertake this removal; but think rather the counsel best that King Joash prescribed to Ahaziah, 'Tarry at home.' Yet as for those that are already gone, far be it from us to conceive them to be such to whom we may not say 'Godspeed'; but let us pity them, and pray for them, for sure *they* have no need of our mocks, which have too much of their own miseries. I conclude, therefore, of the two Englands what our Saviour saith of the two wines, 'No man having tasted of the old, presently desireth the new; for he saith, The old is better.'" In the light of subsequent history this is now rather amusing, and reading it here in New York, one feels very much as he does when, sitting on the deck of an ocean steamer, he comes, in some volume of entertaining anecdotes, upon the famous demonstration of the eminent engineer, who declared

it to be impossible for any steamship to cross the Atlantic. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the fact that in all emigrations, whether from one land to another, or from East to West in this our own land, regard must be had to the spiritual surroundings as well as to the physical advantages, and we ought to remember that even the highest worldly prosperity is all too dearly purchased by the loss of the soul.

But though Elimelech escaped famine by moving to Moab, he could not escape death. The last enemy has many more avenues to the centre of life in us than that of starvation. Even in the midst of plenty the summons came which said, "Thy soul is required of thee," and he could not disobey. So Naomi was left a widow among strangers, with her two sons. How she must have missed the friends and neighbours of Bethlehem in her time of trial! The aliens, we may believe, were kind to her; but in the night of sorrow there are no friends like home friends, especially those of our own kindred. Many drawings must her heart have felt to the old home; but for some reason, not here even suggested, the way thither was closed against her, and she remained some years longer in Moab—so long, indeed, that her sons seem almost to have given up the expectation of return, and married daughters of the land. Perhaps that, too, was a trial to Naomi; but as throughout the story she acts always in a prudent way, it is certain that she would do so in this also.

She did not break her head or her heart by rushing against the inevitable; but accepting that which she could not prevent, she sought to make the best of it; and she succeeded so well that her case stands out a perpetual protest against the silly, unfeeling, and, as I believe, unjust sneers that are so constantly thrown at the mother-in-law in the household. She and they dealt kindly and truly with each other, and so they grew into each other's confidence and affection. It is hard for a mother to see another come between her son and herself, and there is danger lest she should treat her as a usurper; but the true specific for all such cases is that which Naomi and her sons' wives employed, the "dealing kindly and truly with" each other. Love is the universal solvent, especially when it is rooted in the common love of all to Christ, and when it manifests itself in mutual fidelity, not simply in the dealing kindly, but also in the dealing *truly* with each other.

But, alas, the happiness of the sons in their wives, and of the mother in her daughters-in-law, was not of long continuance, for ere long, perhaps owing to some inherited delicacy from their father, Mahlon and Chilion died, and so—how plaintive are the words employed!—"the woman was left of her two sons and her husband." They had gone on and left her behind. Had they done so of deliberate purpose it had been cruel indeed, but they heard a voice which they could not choose but obey, and so they

passed through the silent portal, leaving Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth on the outside. But they left God with them, and they were not bereaved of Him. Still, it was a sad home. Three widows and no child, and, as it would seem also, no resources. Sorrow, solitude, and penury. Widowhood, woe, and want —a sad trinity, needing no words of mine to set it in distinctness before you. What was now to become of them? As we follow the story we shall learn.

Meanwhile let us conclude by pointing out how this brief paragraph illustrates the changeful nature of our earthly life. Elimelech seems to have been what we should call "well off" in Bethlehem, but he went to Moab for comfort, and there found only a grave, beside which, within a few years, were those of his two sons. Alas, what a change for Naomi! And how often we see similar reverses in the families of those we know and love! How often, too, we observe that what men do for the improvement of their circumstances ends in disaster! Ah! but we must not say ends, and *there* is the comfort of it all. You observe that we are here only at the beginning of the history, and when we get to the end we shall be better able to appreciate the nature of this discipline. For it was all under the control of God, who wished thereby not only to educate those who were primarily concerned, but also through them to reach out into the Gentile nations, and bring back one who should not merely become a mother in

Israel, but also part of the first-fruits of that Gentile harvest which the Messiah, in after-generations, was to reap. The very name of her husband might be a comfort to Naomi in all her distress, for when we can say, "My God is King," or, which comes to the same thing, "My times are in God's hands," we are sustained. The times may not be better, but we learn to look through them to the eternities, and to think that God is using the one for the surer gaining by us of the other, and that holds us up. It was a long look from the days of the Judges to those of Christ—at least, it would be a long look for us; but already God was preparing for the advent, and both Elimelech and Naomi were in a sense vicarious sufferers, in order that the world might be taught that the Messiah, coming as He did of the lineage in which are the names both of Rahab and of Ruth, was to be the Saviour of Gentiles as well as Jews. But for these bereavements this had not been taught —at least, through Ruth; and so we Gentiles ought to look with peculiar tenderness on these Israelitish graves in the land of Moab. Those who were buried in them died that Ruth might be redeemed, and Ruth is here the representative of the entire Gentile world. It is a profound mystery. Yet it is a comforting truth.

II.

RETURN AND RECEPTION.

RUTH i. 6–22.

THE essence of home is in persons, not in locality. When, therefore, you have the presence and fellowship of those who are nearest and dearest to you, it is easy to be at home anywhere. But when the loved ones are gone, the fairest surroundings will not fill the void made by their absence. The heart then longs for that which strangers cannot give, and the old memories create a yearning for the old home of early days. It was natural, therefore, that Naomi, after the death of her husband and her sons, should be drawn again towards Bethlehem, so strongly that she determined to return thither. Forlorn, widowed, desolate, and destitute, she craved for that which Moab could not supply. A famine in the fields of Bethlehem took her to Moab; but now a famine in the heart made her hunger after Bethlehem; and having heard that "the Lord had visited His people in giving them bread," she arose to set out for her native place.

But her daughters-in-law would not let her go alone. Apparently she did not request them to accompany her, but of their own accord they chose to make the journey with her. This was equally honourable to her and them. Her life with them had been one of harmony and love. They had grown into her affection, and she had become dear to them. In the delicate relationship which subsisted between them, she had so conducted herself towards them, with reticence, with wisdom, and with kindness; and they had so borne themselves towards her, with deference, with reverence, and with affection, that they could not think of parting with her. So they insisted upon going with her, and for a time she permitted them to be her companions. But it was above all things necessary, in her judgment, that she should be honest with them, and therefore she determined to put fully before them the real state of the case.

They knew little or nothing of the laws and customs of the Jews, and thought, perhaps, that it might be as easy for them to get on in Bethlehem as it had been for her to get on in Moab. It was only just, therefore, that she should set before them as delicately and as clearly as possible the privations which they would have to face. Possibly there was an ordinance in Moab similar to the Levirate law which existed among the Israelites, in accordance with which, when a man died without leaving a son, his brother, or, if

he had no brother, his nearest male kinsman, was under obligation to marry the widow, and the first-born son of such a marriage was to be reckoned the son of the deceased, that his name and lineage might be preserved. Now Naomi gives her daughters-in-law to understand that there was no hope of their obtaining husbands in that way, and her statement implies, though it does not express, that, since that was impossible, there would be for them no possibility of marrying at all. In these modern times, when there are so many avenues open for a woman's working for her own support, though there is need even of more than are at present in existence, that would not be reckoned by many in Ruth's and Orpah's circumstances as a hardship. But in those early days it was quite different, for then, as Dr. Cassell tells us, "the position of a single woman was an unhappy one. It was altogether customary for youthful widows to marry again. Only a husband's house was the true asylum for a woman." [1]

Now Naomi informs her daughters-in-law that in Israel it would be impossible for them to get such a settlement. But she does it with the utmost tact and gentleness. First of all, she bears unqualified testimony to their unfeigned kindness to their husbands and to herself, and that she may do it the more unreservedly and the more impressively, she turns it into a prayer, "Jehovah deal kindly with you, as ye

[1] Lange, *in loco.*

have dealt with the dead, and with me." Then she entreats them to return, each to the house of her own mother, until, if Jehovah pleased, each should find rest in the house of her husband. And when, after she had kissed them, they still refused to comply with her request, saying, "Nay, but we will return with thee unto thy people," she let them see how hopeless it was that they should be provided for through the Levirate law, and by her silence regarding any other plan, she said more expressively than she could have done by words, that there was no prospect of any such permanent home for them in Israel as either of them might easily find in Moab. All the while the tears fell fast from all their eyes, and most of all from hers who had seen the greatest sorrow, for she virtually says, It is far more bitter for me than for you, for the hand of the Lord hath gone out against me. Not, therefore, because she did not enjoy their fellowship, and did not desire their company, was she thus persistent. It was harder for her to part with them than it would be for them to part with her. If they went, never again would there be one beside her to call her mother, and she should go into the dreariest of solitudes, while they would be each in her mother's house, and might look forward to finding rest beneath a husband's roof. Hers would be the greater sacrifice if they went; but she could not be so selfish as to allow them, simply on her account, to bring upon themselves the privations that were inevitably before them.

The effect of this representation was so great on Orpah that, with whatever reluctance, she said farewell, and went back to her kindred. But Ruth, true to the meaning of her name, would not be thus dismissed. She was determined not to be outdone in sacrifice even by Naomi, and therefore she clave unto her mother-in-law. But not yet had Naomi told all that would be required if she went with her to Bethlehem. There was one other subject that must be spoken about; and see with what adroitness of indirectness she suggested it to her daughter-in-law. She said, "Behold, thy sister-in-law is gone back unto her people and her gods; return after thy sister-in-law." Thus she reminded Ruth that if she went with her she would be leaving her gods. It was criminal to worship Chemosh in Judah, and she must well consider whether she could take a step that involved the sacrifice of her religion. She had come to a crossing in her life, where she must part either with Naomi or with the idolatry of Moab, and she must not make such a decision blindly, inconsiderately, and without counting the cost.

But it did not take Ruth long to determine even that. Not for nothing had she lived beside Naomi, during her happy days of wifehood. She had seen in the Hebrew matron much that she had never witnessed in the homes of Moab. There were a purity, a meekness, an affection, and a thoughtfulness for others about her, which made her feel that

the religion which had brought out such qualities in her could not be bad; and so her confidence in and admiration of Naomi made her willing to venture herself with Naomi's Jehovah. It was not a very intelligent faith, indeed, but it was a real faith, like that which a child has in the Saviour of whom his mother tells. He loves the Saviour for his mother's sake, until at length he gets to love his mother for the Saviour's sake. It was said of Thomas Arnold, the great English educator, that he first gained the boys' confidence in himself, and then on the strength of that led them to confidence in Christ. So here Naomi had, unconsciously, by the silent eloquence of her character, led Ruth to confide in her; and then at the critical moment Ruth, through that confidence, was brought to decide for Jehovah, without faltering and without reserve. Nay, so strong was her determination, and so fervent the love out of which it sprung, that it expressed itself in words which no poetry has outrivalled and no pathos has exceeded, and which have come down through the centuries with a music that will not let them be forgotten. "Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: Jehovah do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me." What could be more unqualified

than that? She will share her journey and her lodging, her home and her heritage, her experiences in life and her grave at death. Nor was this all; for, not to be outdone by Naomi's delicacy, she will show that even already she is willing to forswear Chemosh, and therefore she takes an oath by Jehovah that nothing but death will ever part her from her fellowship. It was nobly promised, and it was as nobly performed; for the love that inspired the words was not like a thorn blaze which, bright for a moment, dies down into darkness, but rather like the glow of the sunshine, which lasts through all the day. There was no resisting an appeal of such a sort as that, and so Naomi, all the happier because Ruth, while fully understanding all that her decision involved, had not followed her advice, went with her gratefully and gladly forward towards her destination.

When they arrived at Bethlehem, the people of the city made a great stir, and said, "Is this Naomi?" They recognised her as their old neighbour; and yet they saw that she was greatly changed—so greatly that they could hardly believe that it was she after all. Then on Naomi's side, also, there must have been some misgivings about those who thronged around her. They saw the alterations in her, but they were all unconscious of those in themselves. Ten years make deep marks in those over whom they pass, especially if they have reached the midtime of their lives; and they who say, "How changed you

are," to those who revisit home after a long absence, might well enough use the first personal pronoun and include themselves in the ejaculation. But the external alterations are of small account. The more important changes are those which are not seen all at once; and perhaps when we compare ourselves with what we were, in character and experience, long ago, we might each see reason to exclaim, "Is this really myself!" You may remember that very striking poem of Miss Procter's in which she represents one in mature life looking at a portrait of herself that had been taken long years before, and moralising over the contrast between then and now in a strain that concludes with these two lines:

> "And I marvel to see the stranger
> Who is living in me to-day."

And so I think each of us may do. So at least Naomi did. As her old neighbours called her by the old name in the old street, and said, "Is this Naomi?" she might have said, "Yes, I am changed, I know it; but the deepest change is one you do not see, for my heart is heavy. Call me no more Naomi ('sweet'), for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?"

It was very sad. But the saddest thing was that

the Bethlehemites made no response to her sorrow. Had she come back with pomp and glory and riches, they would have made much of her; for the world always fawns upon prosperity, and those who need least of its attentions get the most. But Naomi's account of her circumstances seems to have damped the ardour of the welcome given her by her old neighbours. None of them invited her home, or offered her hospitality. She was too poor now to be acknowledged in that way; and, after the first expressions of surprise at her appearance, they let her severely alone. Nobody proffered her assistance. Some might even criticise and say, "She did not know when she was well. If she only had stayed among her own kindred, she might have been as full as ever. But she *would* go. She made her own bed, and she must lie on it now, hard as it is. And whatever possessed her to bring that young Moabitish woman with her, only to add to her burden, and make her perplexity the greater?" Ah, we know all about it. The rich have many friends; but they who come home empty from afar, come home full often to coldness and averted looks. Still Naomi, with all her sadness, had a brave, believing heart, and, as she looked down upon the ripened barley falling before the reaper in the fields beneath, she would be reminded of Him who has put for His people the rainbow of His covenant into every cloud of trial.

Now, returning over this deeply pathetic narrative,

we may learn to recognise God's hand in everything. It is noteworthy how constantly Naomi did that. Look over the verses that have to-night been before us, and you will be greatly struck with the frequency with which this feature of her piety presents itself. She had heard "that the Lord had visited His people in giving them bread." She said that "the hand of the Lord had gone out against her," and again, that "the Lord had testified against her, and the Almighty had afflicted her." It is not likely that she either undervalued or overlooked secondary causes, but she believed that God was in and over all these causes, working out His own purposes through their operation. And she recognised in all that came upon her the will of God concerning her. No doubt she was wrong in supposing that Jehovah was acting bitterly towards her, but in that she erred with Jacob when he cried, "All these things are against me." On the other hand, she was not wrong in believing that the providence of God is in and over all events, and it were well for us if we realised that truth. How this universal providence can be maintained without interfering either with the uniformity of the workings of what men call the laws of nature, or with the free agency of man, it may be impossible for us to explain; but that it is maintained I take to be established both by the testimony of history in general, and of individual experience in particular. And if we believe the words of Jesus, when He says that the hairs of

our heads are numbered, and that a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without our Father, we cannot hesitate to accept the doctrine, whatever mystery there may be about the mode of the divine operation.

Now, accepting that doctrine, we have in it an antidote both to pride in the time of prosperity, and to despondency in the season of adversity. For if prosperity comes, it comes from God; and if adversity befalls us, it has been sent from God; and since He is love, and has shown that love by the sacrifice of His Son upon the Cross, we may be sure that, if we are His people in Christ, He cannot mean anything but love to us, whatever He may permit to come upon us. Naomi, therefore, was not wrong in tracing all her changes in condition to God, but she erred in ascribing any bitterness to God in His treatment of her. The father loves the child as really when he administers the disagreeable medicine which is to recover him from disease as when he is dandling him upon his knees. The only difference is in the manner in which the love is shown, and that is accounted for by the differences in the circumstances of the child. In like manner adversity, how bitter soever it may be, is a manifestation of God's love to us, designed for our ultimate and highest welfare. Now this may well reconcile us to trial. I say reconcile us to it. It will not make the trial less, but it will help us to bear it, just as the wounded man is braced for the amputation of a limb, when he

is told that it is indispensable if his life is to be preserved. There is a "needs be" for every affliction, otherwise it would not come upon us under the providence of a God of love; and He sends it not in bitterness to us, but as the necessary means of "making perfect that which concerneth us."

Then if He send prosperity, we owe that to His favour rather than to our own ability; or if in any sense we owe it to our ability, then that ability is itself His gift. So our faith in that view of the case will keep us from self-conceit. Thus the true believer in God's universal providence, if his faith in that doctrine be intelligent, is preserved alike from pride and haughtiness of heart in fulness, and from despair in emptiness. That doctrine is to the Christian's heart what a compensation balance is to a chronometer, and gives him equanimity in all conditions, so that he can sing:

> "Father, I know that all my life
> Is portioned out by Thee,
> And the changes that are sure to come
> I do not fear to see;"

and all his desire is so to possess his soul, that he may fall in with God's plan, and do always the things which please Him. Naomi did not all at once attain to that spirit, but she came to it at length, and we may accept the conclusion at which she ultimately arrived, as the premises from which we ought to reason. Why should we repeat either Jacob's unbelief

or hers, when we see how kindly that was rebuked and condemned in both cases, by the result of that process the course of which so deeply distressed them? "Rest in the Lord, wait patiently for Him." Let Him finish His work in you before you presume to say that He is dealing bitterly with you or testifying against you, for this is one instance in which the otherwise most questionable doctrine is true, that "the end justifies the means," and when you get to the end, you will exclaim, "He hath done all things well."

But as a second lesson from this simple story we may learn the duty of absolute frankness in our dealings with each other. Naomi could not think of taking her daughters-in-law with her without telling them what was before them. If she had not done this, and they had gone with her, then on their first experience of hardship they might have upbraided her for her selfishness and cruelty; so she put everything, delicately, indeed, yet fairly, before them. She told them the worst, so that, if they went with her and had to endure that, they might never say that she had painted things all too rosily. If they were to be disappointed at all, she preferred that it should be in finding things better and not worse than she had indicated. Now, this is a matter of great importance, which is not, I fear, sufficiently considered by most people. When two parties are in negotiation, usually one of them is bent simply and only on success. He wishes, like an advocate, to gain his cause, and exaggerates all

that tells for his side, keeping out of view altogether or depreciating everything against it; and the result, if he carries his point, is sure to be disappointment and estrangement. Some time ago certain parties in the old country were induced, through flattering, and, indeed, lying descriptions, to purchase some lands in Florida, and when they came out to take possession they found there nothing but bare and barren sand. Can you wonder that they exclaimed against the deceitfulness of Americans in general, and Florida land-agents in particular? But while we condemn such rascality as that, are we so sure that our own hands are clean? There is an old Roman maxim, *Caveat emptor*,—"Let the buyer look after himself,"—which has always seemed to me to have the rankest dishonesty beneath it, and which, I fear, is too often acted upon even among ourselves. Now, if we are going to sell anything, let us sell it for what it is, and not for what we know that it is not. If the buyer is mistaken, let us show him his mistake, even if we should at present lose money thereby; for if we do not, we shall not only do a dishonest act, but we shall lose him for a customer. It looks very "smart" to take advantage of the ignorance of him with whom you are dealing, but, if you do, he will be "smart" enough never to give *you* the chance again, and if you go on in that way your business will very soon be at an end. The open, frank, truthful policy, even as a policy, is always best; but it is more than a policy,

it is a duty, and that cannot be evaded without sin.

Nor is it only in business that we need to imitate Naomi's frankness with her daughters-in-law. We ought to act on the same principle, also, in the church. If a congregation eagerly desires a certain man for a pastor, the members should set everything fairly before him, and he should be equally open and above-board with them. He ought not to impose on them with a few showy sermons, which he has elaborated for the captivating of the multitude, and they ought not to cover up everything that is difficult or disagreeable among them. Thus neither will be disappointed in the other. And, in general, if we see a friend bent upon a course of any sort under an entire misapprehension of what the consequence shall be, we ought, in justice to ourselves and in faithfulness to him, to put before him with all delicateness, yet with absolute truthfulness, that which he will have to face. Then if he will he will, but we, at least, have endeavoured to secure that he should know what he is doing.

In this connection who can forget the absolute honesty of the Lord Jesus Christ in His invitations to men to become His disciples? He promised them rest, indeed, but it was rest to their souls, and He never kept out of view the difficulties which they would have to encounter if they sought to act on His principles. Here are the terms of discipleship as laid down by Himself: "If any man be willing to come

after Me, let him renounce self and take up his cross daily and follow Me;" and, as you remember, he exhorted some who were more sentimental than serious to sit down and count the cost, lest, having put their hands to the plough, they should look back, and so prove unworthy of Him. Now, that procedure of our Lord is valuable not only as teaching inquirers what they must expect if they become His disciples, but also as an example to us all to deal with absolute honesty and frankness with all with whom we have any negotiations, and sure I am that if we all did so there would be fewer criminations and recriminations between those who ought to dwell in harmony and love. It cost Naomi a good deal to say what she did to her daughters-in-law, but it would have cost her more if she had allowed Orpah to go forward blindfold to Bethlehem, for, when the eye-opening came, there would have been a painful rupture, followed, perhaps, by constant embitterment.

But a third lesson from this narrative is the value of decision. Look at these words: "When she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go with her, she left off speaking unto her." Ruth's firmness put a stop to Naomi's entreaties. And it is the same always. When Paul *would* go up to Jerusalem, despite the tears of his friends, they ceased their importunity and said, "The will of the Lord be done." And if a man is seen to be decided in his stand for Christ, antagonists will give over assailing him. There is

nothing in the use of which men are more discriminating than entreaty, argument, or influence. So long as the object of their solicitude is wavering, they will bring all their batteries to bear upon him, for there is still the hope that he will yield. But when he comes openly and determinedly out for Christ, they will waste no more ammunition on him. They leave him thenceforth alone, and attack some one else. Thus decision, while it may require an effort to make it, is, after it is made, a safeguard against assault. The attack is reserved for those who are yet undecided, but the decision silences all further importunity. So long as a vessel has no flag at her mast-head, the sea-robber may think it safe to attack her; but let her hoist the flag of this nation, and that will make the assailant pause. In like manner, the hoisting over us of the banner of the Cross, being a symbol of decision, is also an assurance of protection. Up with it then, my hearer, and keep it up; for, while it shows that you have decided to be His, it places you also under His divine protection, and there you are secure. Take your stand— manfully, prayerfully, and determinedly; and when others see that you have done so, they will let you alone.

Finally. This story shows us the difference between mere amiability and devotion. Orpah was a good, kindly-dispositioned woman, thoroughly amiable, very friendly to Naomi, but not willing to make the greatest sacrifice for her. When it came to the point where

she had to choose between the utter sacrifice of herself for Naomi and the return to her mother's house, then, amiable as she was, she went back to Moab. But Ruth's devotion was self-forgetting, and, at whatever sacrifice, she would go with Naomi to Bethlehem. Now, without pronouncing any condemnation on Orpah, I may take these two widowed sisters as types of two classes in their relation to Christ. On the one hand, there are some who allege that they are not opposed to the gospel. On the whole, they rather think well of it. They attend its ordinances. Up to a certain point they are its friends. But after a time they come to a fork in the road, where they must either part with Christ and His salvation or give up some heart-idolatry which they have long cherished; and there they halt. They are not willing to give that up, even for Him. They have amiability, but not devotion—their centre is self, not Christ. But there are others who will follow the Lord no matter at what cost or sacrifice; for it is the Lord they are thinking of and devoted to, not self. Now to which of these two classes do you belong? Are you unwilling to renounce self for Christ? Then let the words of Ruth determine you. Cleave fast to Christ. He is going to a glorious land—the home of joy and love. His lodging is a chamber whose window openeth towards the sunrising, the name of which is Peace. His people are a happy people; His God is a faithful God; His death is a victorious death; His burial is

a hopeful burial, to be followed by a glorious resurrection. There is not another of whom these things can be said with truth—therefore cleave to Him through good report and through evil report, and He will give you an abundant entrance into His Father's house on high.

III.

GLEANING.

RUTH ii. 1–17.

THINGS were at the lowest ebb with Naomi. She had used no mere figure of speech when she said that the Lord had "brought her home empty," for she was literally destitute of the means of support. Something, therefore, had to be done at once to meet the emergency, and Ruth proved herself equal to the occasion. It was the beginning of barley harvest, and the sight of the reapers at work, with the gleaners following them, suggested to her what she would do. She, too, would become a gleaner, for Naomi's sake. But she would do nothing without Naomi's sanction, and therefore she came to her with this request: "Let me now go to the field and glean ears of corn after him in whose sight I shall find grace." What thoughtful delicacy! what excellent wisdom! what energy of promptitude have we here! She did not wait until Naomi asked whether she could not help in some way to keep the wolf from the door, but, identifying herself thoroughly with her

mother-in-law, and recognising the necessity for exertion, she resolutely rose to the emergency, and determined to do what she could for their common maintenance. Nor was she scrupulous as to the sort of industry in which she should engage. It might be true that she had been in comfortable circumstances, and had never needed to do any kind of outdoor work while her husband lived ; but she accepted the situation now, and was willing to do anything, however lowly, if only it were honest, for her own and her mother's livelihood. She did not dictate to Providence, or say that if she could get this or that she would take it, but she could never bring herself to do that other. Rather she was willing to take any honourable course that might open to her, and, as gleaning was the first that presented itself, she would take that, unless Naomi objected.

It is always hard for those who have been in comfort and are reduced to destitution to bring themselves to this willinghood to take what offers, and perhaps it was easier for Ruth to act on such a determination in Bethlehem than it would have been in Moab, among those who had known her when she was better off. But, in all cases, *that* is the surest way out of penury, and the sooner it is taken the shorter is the road. Naomi was well aware of that, we may be sure, and, therefore, with unexpressed admiration of the common sense and what I may call the "pluck" of Ruth, and with silent gratitude to God for this manifestation of

her self-sacrificing love, she put no obstacle in her way, but said to her heartily and with approval, "Go, my daughter."

The field to which Ruth went, though apparently one large and undivided area, was really made up of the aggregate portions of land possessed by those who dwelt in Bethlehem. Just as, even at the present day, in some parts of Switzerland, the agricultural population live in villages round which their several patches of land lie—not cut up by hedges or fenced off by stone walls, but forming what appears to be one immense field, though it is actually very carefully mapped out and divided by landmarks which are perfectly recognisable by the inhabitants themselves; so it was, long ago, in Bethlehem. To a casual visitor there would seem to be but one field, but yet the portion of each proprietor was marked sometimes by heaps of small stones, and sometimes by single upright stones placed at short but regular intervals from each other. This enables us to understand the precept against the removal of a neighbour's landmark, and explains why in the narrative before us the word "field" is in the singular, and why it is said that Ruth found her place of privilege in the "part of the field which belonged to Boaz."

In the law of Moses we find the following ordinances regarding gleaning: "When ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the

gleanings of thy harvest. And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the Lord your God."[1] Again, "When ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not make clean riddance of the corners of thy field when thou reapest, neither shalt thou gather any gleaning of thy harvest; thou shalt leave them unto the poor and to the stranger: I am the Lord your God."[2] And once more: "When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it; it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow: that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hands."[3] There was no money tax levied in Israel for the relief of the poor, and so this provision was made for them. The landholders were never to remove everything from their fields, but were always to leave something for the stranger and the destitute. But while this series of laws required the proprietors of the soil to remember the poor, it did not give indiscriminate right to the destitute to go where they pleased and gather what they could find. That would have led to great abuses. The forward and obtrusive among those who were in want would then have carried off the lion's share; while the timid and shrinking and sensitive ones would have been left out in the cold. And again, there might have been a run

[1] Lev. xix. 9–10. [2] Lev. xxiii. 22. [3] Deut. xxiv. 19.

upon some particular fields, to the almost entire neglect of others, and so there would have been unequal pressure upon the different proprietors. Therefore, while the right of the poor to glean was clearly secured, the exercise of that right by them was regulated by requiring that the gleaner should obtain permission from the proprietor or his representative before beginning operations. So, when she reached the field, Ruth, being attracted in the providence of God, either by the kindly countenance of the steward or by the appearance of the maidens who were working under his superintendence, to Boaz's section of the land, went and made request of "the man who was set over the reapers," saying, "I pray you let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves," and the favour so modestly asked was willingly granted.

But how came Ruth to be able to make herself intelligible to this steward? The question is natural, for she was a Gentile, and had only a few days before arrived in Bethlehem. But the answer has been furnished by the inscription on the Moabite Stone, which was discovered in 1868, and which has proved that there was little difference between the Moabitish and Hebrew languages. The distinguishing peculiarities in each were mainly dialectic—like the provincialisms prevailing in different parts of England; but beneath these there was a common vernacular intelligible to both. Therefore we need not wonder that

Ruth could converse so fluently and intelligently with the people of Bethlehem.

But it is now nearing noonday, and yonder is the proprietor himself, coming to look after his servants. Let us attentively regard him, for he is well worthy of our notice, not only because he will become a principal actor in our little drama, but also because he is a worthy specimen of the people to whom he belongs and of the class which he represents. He is described in the first verse of our chapter as "a mighty man of wealth," but it is questionable if that expression fairly represents the original. The phrase is identical with that which is elsewhere rendered "a mighty man of valour," and only in one other place is it translated as here, "a mighty man of wealth." Some, therefore, have supposed that he was a great warrior, and others have leaned to the idea that he was merely a man of wealth. But in these early days, especially under the rule of the Judges, when hostile inroads on the chosen people were so frequently made by unfriendly neighbours, the man who had great possessions was in a manner compelled to be also a military leader; and so we may very justly combine the two meanings, and speak of him as a valiant man and a wealthy; or, as Dr. J. Morison has paraphrased the expression, "a strong and substantial yeoman." His name was Boaz, which signifies either strength or agility; or, according to some others, prosperousness, and he was, as the chapter tells us, a kinsman

of Elimelech, belonging, indeed, to the same "family." The word translated kinsman here means primarily "an acquaintance," but, as the closest acquaintances are ordinarily kinsfolk, it came to signify a relation. What the degree of relationship between Boaz and Elimelech was we are not distinctly informed. We shall find before the close of the story that he was not the nearest of kin, but that he was a near kinsman, and the rabbis—without, however, giving an atom of evidence in support of their assertion—have affirmed that he was Elimelech's nephew, and therefore the first cousin of Ruth's husband. Note, in passing, the minute providence which led Ruth to the part of the field which belonged to this man. She knew nothing of his relationship to her husband; it had even escaped the recollection of Naomi, until she had it brought back to her memory in the evening by Ruth's report of the day's proceedings. But, all unconsciously to herself, she was drawn to the very place out of which her help was to come. The record says, "Her hap was to light upon" the Boaz part of the field, or, as it might be more literally rendered, "Her hap happened," "her lot met her." But the historian would not have us to believe that it was all by chance. On the contrary, the great lesson of the book is that "the Lord is mindful of His own," and that He leads them through ways that they know not, to the end which He has designed for them. But the writer speaks here after the manner of men.

He describes all that men see. They cannot trace the workings of the divine hand; they perceive only what takes place before their eyes; and so he says here of Ruth that "her hap happened," "her lot met her," "her hap was to light" on the part of the field belonging to Boaz, but he means every reader to infer that God had turned her steps thither.

But listen, as Boaz comes along to join his band, he cries to them, "The LORD be with you." Mark the courtesy of this great man. He is not above speaking kindly to his workmen. He does not hold himself stiffly aloof from them. He does not order them about with haughty indifference, as if he were speaking to an inferior order of beings. No, no; they, too, belong to the chosen people. All alike are children of Abraham. All alike are included in the covenant. They are all members of the same spiritual household, and so he treats them with respectful kindness.

Mark, again, his piety. He cries, "*The* LORD be with you." Now, I know that this has become the common salutation in the East, for Dr. Thomson tells us that "The Lord be with you" is merely the "Allah m'akum" of ordinary custom. I am well aware, also, that, by frequent use, even such expressions of piety come to be employed without any pious feeling, and often even by those who have no faith in God at all. How seldom do we think of God when we say "good-bye," which is simply "God

be with you!" It is possible that even infidels and atheists may take leave of each other with that word, and without any consciousness of inconsistency in so making use of it. So it is possible that Boaz simply meant to be courteous when he used this salutation, and that there was no more piety in it than there is in a modern "good-bye." It is possible, but not very probable, for, as we shall see in the future, this man was in the habit of tracing all blessings to God, and of commending those whom he loved to the care of God, and therefore in his mouth the ordinary salutation was restored from its common colourlessness to its first uncommon piety, and meant everything which it had originally expressed.

But this salutation was no mere one-sided thing. The reapers answered, "The LORD bless thee." They did not look askance upon their employer, as if he had been their natural enemy. They recognised that in his prosperity they would prosper, and that in his adversity they could not but be sufferers with him; and therefore they reciprocated his courtesy, and followed his prayer for them by their prayers for him. It is a beautiful sight. One feels almost as if he were transported three thousand years back to Bethlehem, and saw it all before his eyes. The portly proprietor coming with stately dignity along to his own plot of the field, and kindly saluting the labourers in Jehovah's name; the reapers lifting themselves up simultaneously from their constrained

position, each with the sweat on his face and the sickle in his hand, returning the salutation with hearty affection: "An intercourse this," as William Arnot says, "between rich and poor, between master and servant, which we love to think of in those patriarchal times, which we weep the want of in our own."[1]

As Boaz glances over the band, he sees a stranger among the gleaners. But though he is struck with her appearance, and interested to inquire concerning her,—for in a small community like that of Bethlehem, the appearance of a new-comer would always awaken curiosity,—yet he does not make immediate inquiry concerning her. With a delicateness which seems to have been more common in those times than it is in some circles among ourselves, he waited until Ruth had gone for rest into the hut which had been erected for the shelter of the work-people from the sun, and then in her absence he said to his steward, "What damsel is this?" In response the man told Ruth's story, either as he had himself become acquainted with it from common report, or as it had come out in his conversation with her in the morning, and said, "It is the Moabitish damsel that came back with Naomi out of the country of Moab; and she said, I pray you, let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves: so she came, and hath continued

[1] *The Race for Riches, and some of the Pits into which the Runners fall.* By William Arnot, pp. 1, 2. Edinburgh, 1852.

even from the morning until now, that she tarried a little in the house." On receiving this information, Boaz, probably from his kinship to Naomi, perhaps, also, from a deeper and more subtle cause, became interested in Ruth. Calling her to him by the kindly name of daughter, which indicated at once his age and her youth, and his tender regard for her, he requested her to do all her gleaning on his land, and to keep fast by his maidens, who would give to her the companionship and protection that always come to a woman from the presence with her of those of her own sex. He told her that he had ordered the young men to treat her with civility and respect, and not to subject her to the rough horse-play which was so common on the harvest-field, and he gave her the right to quench her thirst at the vessels which the young men had drawn — perhaps from the well for the water of which David so longed at a later day— for the benefit of all the labourers. This considerate treatment at the hand of a stranger went straight to the heart of Ruth, who fell at the feet of her benefactor, saying, "Why have I found grace in thine eyes, that thou shouldest take knowledge of me, seeing I am a stranger?" But in response he gave her to understand that her whole recent history was familiar to him; and the manner in which he dwells upon its details seems to reveal that he had been deeply impressed with them. Indeed, as he enumerates them, it appears as if he was gathering intensity

as he proceeded, until he could find no relief for his feelings save in the prayer, so simple, so beautiful, so comprehensive, so appropriate, "The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust." There is no conventionality about *that*. Such a supplication could come only from a pious heart, as well as from a kindly disposition, and Ruth was equally sincere when she said, "Thou hast comforted me, and thou hast spoken to the heart of thine handmaid, though I be not like unto one of thine handmaidens." "Alas! no," as if she had added, "but only a widow and a stranger."

But now the hour for refreshment has come, and Boaz invites her to partake of the food which had been prepared for his labourers. This consisted of "parched corn," which, according to Dr. Thomson, was prepared thus: "A quantity of the best ears, not too ripe, are plucked with the stalks attached. These are tied in small parcels, a blazing fire is kindled with dry grass and thorn-bushes, and the corn heads are held in it until the chaff is mostly burned off. When the grain is sufficiently roasted, it is rubbed out in the hand, and eaten as there is occasion."[1] But Dr. Robinson describes another method. He says: "In the season of harvest the grains of wheat not yet fully dry and hard are roasted in a pan or on an iron plate, and constitute a very

[1] *The Land and the Book*, English edition, p. 648.

palatable article of food, which is eaten with bread or instead of it."[1] Of this Ruth ate and was sufficed, and left, or rather "had something over," which, as we shall see, she carried home in the evening to Naomi. Besides this, she "dipped her morsel in the vinegar," which was a mixture of vinegar and water with a little oil, into which each reaper dipped his bread before eating. It was genuine open-air hospitality—a picnic, with the added zest of labour to give it flavour, and the joy of harvest to give it gladness. I have seen and shared in similar feasts many a time in the harvest-fields of the west of Scotland, and there is a spontaneity in all such mirthfulness that contrasts most suggestively with the manufactured cheerfulness of a mere "garden-party."

When the simple meal was over, Boaz lingered behind to tell his young men to let Ruth glean, if she would, even among the sheaves, without reproach, and to bid them let fall purposely a few handfuls, that she might, without any loss of self-respect or without any feeling of undue dependence, obtain all the more from her work. Here, again, we mark the delicateness to which we have already so frequently referred. Many men spoil a kindness by the clumsy way in which they do it; but Boaz secured here that a good service should be rendered to Ruth, even when most she felt that she was helping herself. He contrived that her gleanings should be increased,

[1] *Biblical Researches*, vol. ii. p. 50.

while yet she did not know that they were not all the product of her own industry. So, when the even was come, and she beat out with a stick the grain from the ears which she had gathered, she found that she had taken home to Naomi nearly a bushel of barley.

But now, leaving for another discourse the report which Ruth gave to Naomi of her day's experiences when she went home in the evening, let us take with us some practical lessons for our modern life from this deeply interesting story.

See, then, in the first place, how a change of circumstances reveals character. What an unveiling of Ruth's real nature her poverty made! Had she been always prosperous, we had never thoroughly known her, and Naomi might never have discovered the nobleness that was in her. The purity of the diamond was made manifest by the cutting to which it was subjected. It is not always thus, however. Sometimes reverse of fortune brings out hardness, cynicism, almost misanthropy; and those who seemed in prosperity to be no worse than the average of their neighbours, develop under adversity into miserable, discontented, suspicious, and uncharitable people, who have not a good word to say of anybody, and are at war with themselves, with their neighbours, and with God Himself. But that is only because from the first they have been wrong. When they had their prosperity, they did not thank God for it, but traced it to that in themselves which enabled them to rise in

spite of those around them; but now in their adversity, strangely enough, they cast the blame on others and on God, and they are so bitter in their feelings that they cannot bring themselves to do even that which offers for their own support. Alas for such! they put it almost out of the power of others to assist them, and, wrapped in their own stolid defiance, they are like the man in the river who cried out, "I *will* be drowned, and nobody *shall* help me." I know few more pitiable objects than those whose misfortunes have thus petrified them, and I pray God to keep us all from such a spirit as they manifest. But the finer the nature is originally, the more nobly does it come out when the individual is required to "take a lower room" at the world's banquet. Beautifully has it been said here by a young English preacher, whose early death was a deep sorrow to all who knew him: "The widow who, when bereavement has changed all her fortunes, goes forth to earn her children's bread with her own hands; the daughter who, once accustomed to all that wealth could purchase and the doubtful privilege of unbroken ease, turns her accomplishments into a means of support for her aged father; these, and such as these, reveal in new circumstances new graces,—graces that are sturdy virtues, that shine with an unborrowed splendour, and are beautiful in the sight of Heaven. There has been no humiliation in all this; the brave toilers have made the worst drudgery sublime, and

they have risen to a grander dignity than all the world's worth could confer. Their friends and neighbours may have considered it misfortune, and may call it the Valley of Humiliation; yet though, like Christian, they have met an Apollyon there, they, too, have seen visions of angels, and lifted their voices in happy song. Ah! there are compensations even in this world of which we little dream, and God sets one thing, and often a better thing, over against another in human life. Riches fly, but character is developed; we are compelled to work, and out of work spring our truest joys. Our life is paradoxical but without contradictions; we are made the least that we may become the greatest; and the way down is, with God as guide, always the road to exaltation."[1]

But, although the change in Ruth's circumstances here was from comfort to penury, I cannot help adding that there is a similar revealing power, so far as character is concerned, in a sudden rise from poverty to affluence. Sometimes that, as in the case of Hazael, has shown a hard, ambitious cruelty in a man, in whom the existence of such a disposition was never even suspected. The getting has developed selfishness rather than liberality, and the possession of power has given opportunity for its arbitrary exercise. Then again, in others it has seemed to sweeten them,

[1] *The Beautiful Gleaner.* By Rev. William Braden, pp. 52, 53

and to bring out kindliness. It all depends on the character of the person to begin with, and that again depends on the relationship between him and God in Christ. So, if we would be prepared for anything that God's providence may bring us; if we would not be injured in that which is our truest self, either by sudden prosperity or by unexpected misfortune, we need to look well to our piety; we need to cultivate close and intimate fellowship with God; we need to have the equalising influence within us of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; we need, in one expressive phrase, to have the soul ballasted with Christ, and then no sudden squall or change of wind, whether from affluence to poverty or from poverty to affluence, will endanger or submerge us. Either prosperity or adversity will capsize us without Him, but with Him in the boat beside us we are always safe.

But now, in the second place, let us see in the fellowship between Boaz and his reapers a finger-post pointing to the true solution of all difficulties between employers and employed. We have heard and read a great deal on that subject in these recent days. Indeed, little else has been discussed among us of late, either in the newspapers or in private conversation or in public discourse. For the present, indeed, we have reason to congratulate ourselves that the premature explosion of that bomb in Chicago[1] has

[1] This discourse was delivered not long after the riot in Chicago, for which the Anarchists were tried.

opened the eyes of the community to the danger that is involved to our property and civilisation from the occurrence of such troubles, and unified the sentiment of the nation as to the manner in which that kind of warfare is to be dealt with. But the real question lies back behind the violence to which all strikes seem to be near of kin, and the anarchism which in all our large cities is so ready to take advantage, for its own infamous purposes, of any disorder that may arise, and for which the working men, as a class, are not to be held responsible. The real question is this: How may the state of feeling between employers and employed, which is so apt to break out into open antagonism, be removed and permanently made impossible? Why is it that every little difference between them as to wages or hours of labour leads on to strikes and bitter estrangement? How comes it that the labour atmosphere is so explosive and electric? And what shall be done in the way of remedy? Now when—apart from recent provoking manifestations, which, for the time being, have tended to prejudice many against the working men—we look at this problem, we shall find that there have been faults on both sides. If they have not been as courteous to their employers as his reapers were to Boaz, neither have their employers always been as courteous to them as Boaz was to his reapers. And if the employed have been utterly neglectful of the principles of political economy,

their employers have not always remembered that political economy, though it be a real science, is not mechanics, and has to do not with machines, but men. It is true, indeed, that in recent strikes the cause of alienation has been the employment of men who for some reason—not touching either their character or efficiency—have been distasteful to the majority of the workmen ; and it is astonishing that men of intelligence do not see that interference of that sort is a flagrant infringement upon the liberty of other workmen to earn their bread as they can. It is surprising, too, that they do not realize that when they strike they terminate the contract between them and their employers, and so put themselves out of court altogether, and forfeit all right even to arbitration. Then as to the question of hours. It is not to be denied that the demand of ten hours' wages for eight hours' work is one which, in its blindness, either does not or will not perceive that it is as impossible to get that really in the long-run as it is to get five out of twice two. For even if the demand be acceded to, then, when things have adjusted themselves to the new state of matters thereby created, as they infallibly will do in a very short time, it will be found that they have simply added one-fifth to the price of everything which they have to buy, and that is the same as saying that the purchasing power of their wages—nominally the same in dollars and cents—will then be reduced by one-fifth. Really, that is substantially what they

are bringing upon themselves—nay, what they are eagerly seeking, with all the added expense and danger of their strikes. Much, therefore, might be accomplished by spreading a little more widely among them the knowledge of these principles, which are as simple as the alphabet, but as inexorable as the law of gravitation.

But still the question arises, How shall we heal the state of feeling out of which this habit of looking upon each other as natural enemies has grown up between employers and employed? Now, in answer, some have suggested arbitration; some have exhorted the working men to make up for the want of capital in the hands of one by co-operation among themselves, so that they may become themselves competitors of the employers; and some have proposed that by means like those suggested by Professor Ely, of Baltimore, the employed should be given a share of the profits of the employers, though that would be one-sided if they were not also called upon to make up a share of the losses—but, so far as I have seen, few have spoken about that. Now, of course, a great deal can be said in favour of such schemes as these; but for the present they all seem to me alike impracticable, because they all require for their successful operation a disposition towards each other which is radically different from that which has existed for a considerable time between them. If we had *that* changed, the problem would be more manageable.

I am not sure, indeed, but that the simple changing of that would remove the problem altogether. But how are we to change that? How shall we remove all bitterness out of the hearts of employers towards their employed, and how shall we remove out of the hearts of the employed all envy of their employers? To that I have but one answer. The Lord Jesus Christ broke down the middle wall beween Jews and Gentiles, and only He can reconcile—not superficially, but really and through and through—employers and employed. Boaz and his reapers belonged to the same commonwealth of Israel, and were heirs of the same covenant of promise. They were children of the same household of faith, and so they regarded each other as brethren. That was what kept this greeting from degenerating into a mere formality. That was what produced their mutual kindliness for each other. And in the same way, when employers and employed shall recognise their common brotherhood to Christ, and feel that in dealing with each other they are dealing with Christ, then and then only shall we get rid of that mutual suspicion of each other which is the soil wherein all these roots of bitterness spring up. I hear, therefore, in these labour troubles a new and louder call to the churches of our land to prosecute with vigour the work of home evangelisation, not only among the working people, but also among their employers. I emphasise that last clause, "but

also among their employers," for they need it just as much as their workmen. It is common, I fear, to think that evangelisation is required only for the masses of the employed, but that is a delusion. There are proportionately as many unbelievers in the gospel among the capitalists as there are among the labourers. I fear that, in proportion to the numbers of both, there are more, and, as a rule, employers are far too indifferent to the gospel. They are not sufficiently under its power, and perhaps the inkling of what atheistic socialism would do if it could, which these last weeks have given, may help to quicken them to a sense of the importance of their identifying themselves more thoroughly with Christ. But only in the meeting of both in Christ will the solvent of this problem be found, and we must seek so to deal with *both* as to bring that about. For when that is reached there will be courtesy and kindliness in their intercourse. They will not be afraid of each other, neither will they be suspicious of each other, but they will love as brethren, and selfishness will cease to be the mainspring of their conduct. This has been demonstrated very clearly in the case of individual establishments. I have not heard of any strikes or bitterness at St. Johnsbury, Vermont, where masters and men are office-bearers in the same church, and brethren at the same communion-table. And that is by no means a solitary instance. Conversing not long ago with the president of a railway who had

just been bereaved of his wife, I learned from him that some of the most touching letters which he had received at the time of his trial came from surface-men on the line. Wherever he had gone he had sought to show himself friendly to his men, and so they could not help expressing sympathy with him. Nothing approaching to any feeling of suspiciousness had ever come between them, and he has no fear of a strike among them. Give us this common Christianity between them, and we may trust *that*, either to prevent any differences or to settle them peacefully when they do arise. Nothing else will do it. But if you have that, any feasible plan will be workable. "He is our peace." Oh, when shall the different classes among us find out that? Come forth out of Thy royal chamber, O Thou living Christ! In the triumph of Thy love bring employer and employed together to Thy feet, that they may choose Thee for the great arbitrator between them, and Thy decisions, being founded in love as well as justice, shall be willingly accepted by them both.

I had intended to add a word on the beautiful prayer of Boaz for Ruth—"The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou hast come to trust"—but I must forbear. Let me only commend to you all the protection of these outspread wings. You must go to trust somewhere. You are now trusting in something. Whither have you gone?

In what are you trusting? No wings but God's can cover you in the time of trial and in the day of judgment. Therefore, get beneath them now. This is your opportunity. Get beneath them *now*, lest a day should come when He shall say, "How often would I have gathered thee as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not? Behold, now, your house is left unto you desolate."

IV.

THE THRESHING-FLOOR.

RUTH ii. 18–iii. 18.

NAOMI had probably an anxious day of it, as she sat at home, wondering how her daughter-in-law was faring among strangers in the harvest-field. But when she saw Ruth return at even-tide with an epha of barley in her mantle and a look of satisfaction on her face, she did not need to ask how she had got on, for she knew at once that "the lines had fallen unto her in pleasant places." We can easily imagine with what pride the daughter laid her burden down at the mother's feet, and with what delight she brought forth the surplus of the parched corn which Boaz had given her at noon, and which she had so thoughtfully reserved as a treat for the solitary one whom she had left at home. We can easily, also, fill in the outline which the sacred writer has given us of the mother's joy, as, looking at the result of her daughter's exertions, she broke out into ejaculations of pleased surprise, and ran on into a series of questions without waiting for an answer to any one of them; finding

at length the fitting climax to her feelings in a benediction of her benefactor. It was as if she had said: "Well done, my daughter! Who could have expected anything like this? Where did you get all that barley? And the parched corn, too—how good it is! Surely they must have been particularly kind to you. Whose part of the field were you in? whom did you glean with? He must have taken special notice of you, and, whoever he was, may a blessing rest on him for his goodness. It may have been a little thing to him, but it has been a great deal to you and to me."

Then, when Ruth had rested a little, and Naomi's effusiveness gave her an opportunity to speak, she told that the man on whose part of the field she had gleaned was Boaz. In a moment it flashed upon Naomi's memory that Boaz was a kinsman of Elimelech—was, in fact, one of the Goelim, or redeemers, on whom it might devolve, according to the law of Moses, to buy the land which had belonged to her deceased husband, and which, under the pressure of circumstances, she would now have to sell in order to get the means of support. This being the case, Naomi thought she saw the motive of Boaz in showing such kindness to Ruth, and so the benediction, which had before been general and impersonal, is repeated by her with definite reference to him, for she says: "Blessed of Jehovah be he, who hath not left off his kindness to the living and to the dead;" that

is, who hath shown his generosity to the living, and through that hath made manifest his continued respect for the memory of the dead. She recognised the providence which had conducted Ruth to his part of the field; and hearing of his treatment of Ruth, and of his request that she should keep fast by his young men until the close of his harvest, she probably discerned in this the beginning of the end of all their troubles, though it is hardly likely that as yet she had any definite conception of the precise manner in which they were to be terminated. But, whatever were her motives, she heartily urged Ruth to accept the invitation of Boaz; and thus it came about that all through the time of harvest, which lasted for at least two or three weeks, Ruth kept close by the maidens of Boaz to glean by day, and returned at evening to the abode of Naomi, to cheer her by her nightly reports of the day's doings, given by the one in the open frankness of affection, and commented on by the other with the wisdom of experience.

But when the harvest was finished, the old question of "What shall we do now?" had to be confronted; and this time Naomi took the initiative, for now she thought she saw the prospect of a life settlement for Ruth. It is beautiful to mark the unselfishness of each of these women, or rather their unselfish consideration of each by the other. As Cassell has said: "While the women are in distress, it is Ruth that takes the initiative; now, when hope grows large, it is

Naomi. When hardship was to be endured, the mother submitted her will to the daughter, for Ruth was not sent to glean, but went of her own accord; now, when the endeavour is to secure the joy and happiness held out in prospect, the daughter yields in all things to the direction of the mother. The thought of labour for the mother originates with the daughter, but it is the mother who forms plans for the happiness of the daughter."[1] Naomi had set her heart on finding rest for Ruth in the house of a husband, and that husband no other than Boaz. With this object in view, she unfolds a plan which she desires Ruth to follow in every particular. In the simple narrative it is given thus: "And now is not Boaz of our kindred, with whose maidens thou wast? Behold, he winnoweth barley to-night in the threshing-floor. Wash thyself therefore, and anoint thee, and put thy raiment upon thee, and get thee down to the floor: but make not thyself known unto the man, until he shall have done eating and drinking. And it shall be, when he lieth down, that thou shalt mark the place where he shall lie, and thou shalt go in, and uncover his feet, and lay thee down; and he will tell thee what thou shalt do."

Now all this, it must be confessed, seems to us, with our modern ideas, not only exceedingly improper, but also terribly hazardous. It must be admitted, too, that, judged even by the convention-

[1] Lange, *in loco.*

ality of those almost patriarchal times, it was unusual, and, as the words of Boaz himself make evident, would have been compromising to the reputation of both if it had been known. But, in order to a right estimate of its nature, we must take in all that can be said upon the other side.

We must remember, in the first place, that the proposal was made by Naomi, whose whole character, as it comes out in this book, was marked by devout reverence towards God and purity towards man, and to whom the honour of Ruth was as dear as her own. We cannot, therefore, believe that she would wilfully do that which would endanger her reputation. That would have been but a poor return for all the self-sacrifice that Ruth had manifested on her behalf.

Again, we must take it for granted that she knew the sort of man Boaz was. Probably in the years gone by he had been the companion and friend of her husband, and she had then had means of judging of his character. Then, since her return she had been watching him, and perhaps she felt that she could trust Ruth in his hands. Furthermore, we must believe that there had been lying behind all this an interesting history which is here unwritten, and which had come out during these harvest weeks in the evening talks of Ruth after her return from the field, and perhaps, also, in the visits of Boaz, on occasions, at her humble home. She had been taking notes very diligently all the time, and it may be that

the pensive absent-mindedness of her daughter, now that the gleaning season was over, had revealed to her that she was something else than indifferent to her benefactor; while, perhaps, there were indications also on the part of Boaz that his interest in Ruth was more tender than that of mere kindness and compassion.

But, more than all, we must give full weight to the fact that Boaz was one of Elimelech's Goelim, and to the claim which law and custom gave to her on him in that capacity. There were three duties which devolved upon the Goel, or kinsman redeemer. These may be succinctly described as follows: When an Israelite, through poverty, sold his inheritance and was unable to redeem it, it devolved upon his Goel to purchase it. Again, when an Israelite had wronged any one and sought to make restitution, but found hat the party whom he had wronged was dead without leaving a son, it fell to the next of kin of the injured party to represent him and receive the reparation. Finally, when a man was foully murdered, it fell to the Goel or next of kin, subject to the provisions laid down in connection with the Cities of Refuge, to execute justice on the murderer, and hence he was called the Avenger of Blood.

But along with these duties devolved on the Goel by law, others seemed to have been required of him by custom; for, when there was no one else to do it, he came to be looked to for the carrying out of the provisions of what is called the Levirate law. That

statute enjoined that when a man died without leaving children, his brother should marry the widow, and the first-born of that marriage should be accounted the child of the deceased. But when there was no brother-in-law, custom looked to the Goel to take his place. The law did not absolutely require it, but public opinion did — though it did not put the repudiation of the widow's claim by the Goel upon the same plane of dishonour as it did that of the brother-in-law. If the brother-in-law refused to marry his sister-in-law, he was subject to insult at her hands by her plucking off his shoe and spitting in his face in the gate of the city — acts which were equivalent among us Western people to the knocking of a man's hat over his eyes on the Exchange — and the subjecting of him, besides, to the vilest indignity. In the case of a kinsman not so near as the brother, there was indeed no specific statute on the subject, but custom had sanctioned a kind of amalgamation of the law relating to the Levirate marriage, with that concerning the Goel, or redeemer; so that, as Alexander has said, "The Goel had a right to purchase the land, but in so doing came under an obligation from custom to marry the widow of the deceased owner; and the brother-in-law (Levir) was bound to marry the widow of his deceased brother, which involved, as a matter of course, the redemption of his property if he had sold it."[1]

[1] Alexander's Kitto, *s. v.* "Kinsman."

Now, if I have succeeded in making the matter plain to you, it will be apparent that Boaz, as a Goel of Elimelech, had a right by law to redeem his property, and that, according to the custom, the exercise of that right involved on his part, also, the marriage of Naomi. But Naomi transferred her claim to Ruth, and the question she had to solve was how to bring that before the notice of Boaz. It was not his part in such a case to offer. He had to wait until he was requested to act; and this plan was formed by Naomi for the purpose of bringing him to prompt and decisive action in the case.

But when all is said that can be said on her behalf, I fully appreciate and indorse the words of Kitto, when he thus writes: "We still think, however, that the *occasion* for making this demand was unusual, and, to a certain degree, indiscreet. This may be gathered from the anxiety which Boaz himself eventually expressed, while doing the utmost honour to her character and motives, that it should not be known that a woman had been there. He must have feared that evil tongues might misconstrue, to his and her discredit, a proceeding far from evil when rightly understood. It is not unlikely that, when this matter had been first suggested by Naomi, Ruth, as a stranger, had shrunk from making this claim publicly in the harvest-field, and that Naomi had, therefore, to spare her in that respect, devised this mode of enabling her to do so in private, in which she would

find less difficulty, seeing that Boaz had already won her confidence by his fatherly consideration for her. It may be that desire to evade one difficulty somewhat blinded this good woman to the danger that may have lurked in the other alternative."[1] Keeping, then, these considerations in mind, we may without any difficulty thread our way through the rest of the story.

The threshing-floor in those times, as, indeed, still in the East, was in the immediate neighbourhood of the harvest-field. It was a level area, the ground of which was trodden into hardness, and the grain was threshed, either by the dragging over it of a heavy slab called *mowrej*, or by the trampling of cattle. Then the winnowing was accomplished by throwing up the grain with a fork against the wind; and that operation was frequently performed at night to get the benefit of the evening breeze. At such times, also, it was usual either for the owner of the field or some of his men to sleep on the floor, in order that he might be ready to give the alarm if any robbers should come to steal from him the product of his industry. Thus Dr. Edward Robinson, speaking of Hebron, says, "Here we needed no guard around our tent. The mowers of the crops came every night and slept upon their threshing-floors to guard them, and this we had found to be universal in all the region of Gaza. We were in the midst of scenes precisely like

[1] *Daily Bible Illustrations*, vol. iii. p. 40.

those of the Book of Ruth, when Boaz winnowed barley in his threshing-floor, and laid himself down at night to guard the heap of corn."[1] And Dr. Thomson tells us that he has "on various occasions seen the mowers sleeping on the summer threshing-floors to prevent stealing, just as the wealthy Boaz did when Ruth came to him." He adds that "though it is not customary for women to sleep at those floors, and to do so would produce the same unfavourable impression which Boaz apprehended, yet it is not unusual for husband, wife, and all the family to encamp at the threshing-floor and remain until the harvest is over."[2]

These particulars will enable us to realise the whole circumstances, as Ruth followed implicitly the instructions of her mother-in-law. Watching until Boaz was fast asleep, she went and lay down at his feet. But, when he became aware of her presence, he started up, and said, "Who art thou?" Whereupon she answered, "I am Ruth thine handmaid: spread thy skirt," or rather spread thy wings—for there is no reference to the cover which she had taken from his feet, but rather she uses the figure of the bird which Boaz had already employed in speaking to her of Jehovah—spread thy wings over thine handmaid, for thou art a Goel, or kinsman redeemer. "Take me under thy protection as thy wife." That was the

[1] *Biblical Researches*, vol. ii. p. 446.
[2] *The Land and the Book*, as before, pp. 648, 649.

formal claim of her words, and Boaz at once understood them in that sense, for he said, "Blessed be thou of Jehovah, my daughter: for thou hast showed more kindness in the latter end than at the beginning, inasmuch as thou followedst not young men, whether poor or rich." That is to say, "This act of thine is a greater kindness to Naomi than was even thy leaving of Moab for her sake; for thou hast deliberately preferred to stand in Naomi's place, and to claim from the Goel thy right at his hands, in order that 'the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren, and from the gate of his place,' and because thou hast thus merged thyself in the house and lineage of Elimelech, blessed be thou of Jehovah." Then he pledged himself to do all that she required, because all the gate of his people knew that she was a worthy woman.

But there was still one obstacle in the way, for, though he was *a* Goel, he was not *the* Goel. There was a kinsman nearer to Elimelech than he, and nothing could be done by Boaz until that relative had repudiated. He promised, therefore, that in the morning he would bring the matter before that other, and if he would perform the kinsman's part, well and good, let him do it; but if he would not, then Boaz would take his place, and this assurance he confirmed with an oath, "As Jehovah liveth." Then in the morning, before one could discern another, he sent her away to Naomi, and that her mother might have

the assurance of his good-will, even although her plan had not gone altogether as she had expected, he sent with her six measures of barley, which he scooped into her mantle.

On her return, Naomi met her with the singular yet suggestive question, "*Who* art thou, my daughter?" as if she had said, Art thou still the widow of Mahlon,[1] or art thou now the betrothed of Boaz? and in answer Ruth told her all she had to tell, which, when Naomi heard, she knew how to interpret, for she said, "Sit still, my daughter, until thou know how the matter will fall: for the man will not rest until he have finished the thing this day." How true this forecast was, and what came out of the intervention of Boaz, we shall see in our next discourse; meanwhile, let us ourselves become gleaners, and gather up a few suggestive lessons from this fruitful field.

And, in the first place, let me draw your attention to the general wholesomeness and helpfulness of evening confidences among the members of the same household when the labours of the day are done. Few things in this most interesting story are more beautiful than the frank and simple talks between Naomi and Ruth, in the confidence of domestic *abandon*, before they retired for the night. The daughter then made the mother sharer in all her experiences throughout the day, and the mother followed up the communication with practical sugges-

[1] See chapter iv. 10.

tions for the morrow. One needs not to approve in every particular the counsels which Naomi gave, before he can see the value of such a household custom; and if I may speak alike from observation and experience, I would say that the happiest hours of home life are those in which parents and grown-up children sit together in winter by the cheerful fire, and in summer in the cool, dim twilight, and tell each other where they have gleaned, and with whom, and with what success they have laboured throughout the day. Nor is the happiness of such fellowship all the good that there is in it. It unifies the household, giving to all a deep and living interest in the labours and success of each, and so helping to counteract that tendency to utter individualism which is one of the greatest evils of our modern life. Too often the members of the same household are nothing more to each other than sharers of the same abode. They go outside to have their confidences with strangers, and frequently parents and brothers and sisters are among the last to know of any unusual experience through which they have been brought. Thus the home becomes little more than a small hotel, and the helpful counsel of the parents and the other members of the family is entirely lost. Sure I am that many of the young people who go astray in modern business or society might have been kept from evil courses if only they had utilised the blessing of this home cabinet; while, on the other hand, the hearts of

parents would have been kept fresh and healthy if their children had but made them partakers of the details of their day's doings. The most natural thing in the world for a little child is to tell where he has been, and what he has been about; and when he grows up into manhood, there is something wrong with him, or something wrong at home, if that healthy custom is abandoned. Either he has begun to go to places of which he is ashamed to speak, or his parents and the other members of the household have not been careful to maintain the happiness of home to such a degree that it will be in his estimation more attractive than all other localities. Let me urge, therefore, upon those who, like Ruth, must be away all the day, to engage in nothing, and to go to no place of which they would be ashamed to speak in the evening to father or mother or sisters; and let me entreat the parents and members of families generally to vie with each other in their efforts to make home happy for those who are pulling at the business oar, and "toiling in rowing" all the day. Sisters, why should you reserve your winning smiles and patient attention and willing practice of accomplishments for the party outside, or for the casual visitors who come to call upon you, and show yourselves petulant, discourteous, disobliging, and generally unamiable to your own brothers? Do you not realise that much of the moulding of their characters is in your hands? and if they fall into evil courses, what will you have

to say at last when the Lord asks you, "Where are your brothers?" Perhaps if you had cared to make yourself attractive to them, they might not now have been wanderers from their fathers' houses.

And you, young men, who are living at home, be thankful that you have still a father and a mother to whom you can go with all your concerns, and who are still able and willing to be your advisers. Do not despise their wisdom; do not trample upon their love. You will never know the worth of them until you lose them; and then, oh, what a misery it will be to you to reflect that you slighted their counsel and made light of their affection while they lived!

Parents, you, too, have a solemn responsibility here. Do not allow yourselves even to seem to be troubled when your young people come to you for advice. Do not account their affairs as too insignificant for you to be interested in; hear them with patient, real, loving attention, and give them the best wisdom you can command. Encourage them to come to you with their concerns, and beware of drawing the cord of authority so tight that it will snap, and leave you without so much as influence. Remember that as young people grow up to manhood and womanhood they must be guided rather than governed by you; and if you would gain their confidences and keep them, you will succeed best when you seem least eager to demand them as of right. As one has very wisely said: "Young men and

women, conscious of growing personal responsibility, will not tolerate being treated as mere children, and will fret against what appear to them as unnecessary restraints. But it is possible by wise management to obtain all desirable information without a display of authority, and without arousing antagonism. Knowing the tender interest of their parents' hearts in all their experiences, sons and daughters will love to return home and voluntarily tell all the story of the day, incidents humorous, vexing, or encouraging, and those fireside reviews of life will be the most delightful part of their time."[1]

Let me point out to you now, in the second place, the true ideal of marriage. Naomi put it precisely right when she said to Ruth, "Shall I not seek rest for thee, that it may be well with thee?" The rest of the wife should be in the affection of the husband, and the rest of the husband should be in the love of the wife. Each should have comfort in the support and confidence of the other. The husband should be always sure of the sympathy and co-operation of the wife; and the wife should be able to rely implicitly on being understood and trusted—and, if need be, defended—by the husband. They should be so identified—or, to take the smaller and better word, so *one* with each other—that whatever comes to one comes to both; that neither should add to the affliction of the other by putting his or her own

[1] Braden. *The Beautiful Gleaner*, p. 478.

weight on to the load that has to be borne; that, in short, they should divide each other's burdens and double each other's joys. The confidence of each in the other should be so absolute and entire as to give *rest* to the heart of each, whether in the trials of business, or in the "many things" that are so troublous and distracting in household management. Unless this be the case, a marriage is shorn of its highest glory, its greatest helpfulness, and its holiest influence. And yet, alas! how often it is far below this beautiful ideal! It is entered upon too frequently without knowledge of each other's characters, aptitudes, and idiosyncrasies, and from merely secular motives, because of the position which it will command or the advantages which it will bring, and without any idea of mutual helpfulness. And then after a time the illusion is dispelled; disappointment leads to alienation, alienation to unhappiness, unhappiness to divorce, and that, again, sometimes—so little valued are the lessons of experience—to a repetition of the same miserable circle with other parties. I say nothing now of the evil of the short and easy method of obtaining divorces which is the shame of our country, and which is twin-sister to Mormonism itself; but I do cry out with all my might against those thoughtless alliances and mercantile marriages which end so frequently in divorce, and I implore young people to view this matter, "not lightly or unadvisedly, but

reverently, discreetly, soberly, and in the fear of the Lord." I am old-fashioned enough to believe in love, and I am Christian enough to believe that no Christian can be truly happy in an alliance in which Christ is not supreme. Therefore I would lay down two principles: to all alike I say, do not marry one whom you do not love—that is the law of nature; then to the Christian I add this other: do not marry one who has no love to Christ—that is the law of grace. Comply with these two precepts, and other things will soon naturally and easily adjust themselves; but without these essentials nothing will go right for any length of time. Above all, young woman, never marry an infidel to convert him, or a drunkard to steady him, or a rake to reform him; for if you do, you sacrifice yourself for nothing, inasmuch as you will entail misery on yourself without any certainty of benefiting him. Let the reformation come first, and then there will be more assurance of happiness.

But now just a word, in conclusion, on the value of character. Boaz said to Ruth, "All the city of my people doth know that thou art a worthy woman;" and his conviction that she was indeed a noble woman led to his interest in her welfare, and ultimately to his making her his wife. But Ruth had not been very long in Bethlehem, and the fact that so soon she had gained such a reputation speaks volumes for her deportment. Character cannot long be hid. If it be

good, it will reveal itself in worthy conduct; but if it be bad, it will let itself out, in spite of any hypocritical efforts to hide itself. Through some little chink of unconscious and, therefore, unwatched evil, it will surely come to light. The daily life of Ruth in the field was enough to let all know the sort of woman that she was. Thus character and reputation are closely interlinked. The one is the flower, the other is the fragrance; but to have the fragrance rich, you must have the flower perfect. So, to have the reputation good, you must not look to that first, but to the character, and then the reputation will take care of itself—nay, even in apparently questionable circumstances, as here, the character will come to the rescue of the reputation. How important, then, it is to have a good character! It is not only the highway to success in life, it is in itself the highest success. Cultivate good character, therefore; and, that you may do that in the right way, unite yourself to Jesus by living faith; then go on after the plan of Peter, "add to your faith courage, to your courage knowledge, to your knowledge temperance, to your temperance patience, and to your patience godliness, to your godliness brotherly kindness, and to your brotherly kindness love;" and then you will be living epistles of Christ, known and read of all men, carrying in your deportment the infallible indorsement of the genuineness of your piety.

V.

THE LOVING MARRIAGE.

RUTH iv.

IN Palestine all important cities were surrounded by strong walls. This was necessary for the defence of the inhabitants from the assaults of robbers, and nightly everything of value that could be stolen was brought in from the outside for safe-keeping. The only entrance or egress was by the gate, which was open throughout the day, but closed at nightfall, and which, from the continual going out and coming in of the people by it, came to be a favourite place of resort for the community. The passage in which it stood was commonly vaulted, having a chamber over it, and so it was shady and cool, furnishing an agreeable lounging-place for all who sought for any reason to linger beneath its shelter. There were also chambers or recesses at the sides, and "a void place" of some considerable extent,[1] where the people could conveniently assemble in considerable numbers. Thither went the curious to see and to be seen, and

[1] 1 Kings xxii. 10.

to hear all the news of the neighbourhood. Thither the friend went to meet those whom he was expecting from the country, or to accompany those who were setting out upon a journey. There the markets were held; there, too, all legal business was transacted, in a very primitive yet wholly satisfactory manner.

Many of these old customs continue to the present day, and the vivid description given by Dr. W. M. Thomson of what he had often seen in Jaffa may help us to realise more thoroughly the nature of the court which Boaz extemporised for the securing of the object which he had so much at heart. Says our venerable friend: "In 1834 I resided for several months in this city (Jaffa), and, to pass away the time, frequently came out in the afternoon 'to the gate through the city, and prepared my seat in the street.' There the governor, the kady, and the elders of the people assembled daily, 'in a void place,' and held an extemporaneous divan, at which affairs of every kind were discussed and settled with the least possible ceremony. But recently from America, I was greatly amused with this novel open-air court, conducted amid the din, confusion, and uproar of a thronged gateway—men, women, and children jostling each other, horses prancing, camels growling, donkeys braying, as they passed in and out of the gate; but nothing could interrupt the proceedings or disturb the judicial gravity of the court. The whole scene, with all its surroundings, was wholly Oriental, and

withal had about it an air of remote antiquity which rendered it doubly interesting."[1]

To the gate of Bethlehem, then, Boaz went straight up from his threshing-floor. Naomi had not misjudged when she averred that he would not rest until he had brought matters to a head. It was the first business that he set about that day; and when he reached the gate, he sat down on one of the seats in its vicinity with the air of one who had an important duty to discharge. By and by he observed the Goel of Naomi coming near, on his way out into the field, and called to him, "Ho, such a one! turn aside, sit down here." The original words, translated "such a one," are very peculiar, and some have supposed that they were an ordinary legal formula, like the John Doe or Richard Roe of old English documents; while others have preferred to take them as we take indefinite initials, like A. B. C. or M. N., and the like. They are in Hebrew "P'loni almoni," the former derived from a word meaning to mark out or distinguish, and the latter from a term which signifies to hide; so that both together seem to give the notion of one who is indicated, though in a certain sense concealed; and it is interesting to note that he who, as we shall presently see, would not marry Ruth lest he should mar his own inheritance while perpetuating the name of Mahlon, is not even named in this narrative, and has passed into utter oblivion.

[1] *Southern Palestine and Jerusalem*, pp. 29, 30.

Thus accosted by Boaz, this anonymous Goel sat down to await developments, wondering, perhaps, what was coming next, and only whetted to a more eager curiosity as he saw Boaz pick out ten men of the elders of the city, and place them in formal order, that they might be both witnesses and judges. Every city was governed by elders, and perhaps ten were needed to make what we should call a quorum, even as among modern Jews it is said that ten are required to constitute a synagogue. In any case, we may be sure that Boaz knew what he was about, and proceeded in everything according to consuetudinary law.

The court having been thus constituted, Boaz began the business by addressing the unnamed kinsman thus: "The parcel of land which was our brother Elimelech's, Naomi, that is come again out of the country of Moab, has determined to sell, and I have said, I will uncover thine ear to say, 'Buy it before the inhabitants, and before the elders of my people. If thou wilt redeem it, redeem it; but if thou wilt not redeem it, then tell me, that I may know: for there is none to redeem it beside thee; and I am after thee. And he said, I will redeem it. Then said Boaz, What day thou buyest the field of the hand of Naomi, thou must buy it also,'" or, as some read, "thou must buy also Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance. And the kinsman said, I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I mar mine

own inheritance: redeem thou my right to thyself;" or rather perhaps, "redeem thou instead of me."

Now, to understand all this, it is necessary to recapitulate some things which we have already advanced concerning the duties of the Goel. The Jewish nation was a theocracy, that is to say, Jehovah was the King, and the land belonged to Him. Under His sanction it had been originally appropriated to the people, according to their tribes and families by lot. But they could not do with it as they chose, and it never could be alienated from the family to whom it fell at first. If the possessor for the time became poor, he might sell it, but never out and out, for it was always to revert to himself or his heirs at the year of jubilee; nay, if he were able to redeem it before that time he might do so, or if, being himself unable, his next of kin had the means of buying it back, he had the privilege of redeeming it. Again, when the proprietor offered his land for sale, it was the privilege of the next of kin to become the purchaser, and no other kinsman could buy it until he had formally given up that which was by law his privilege. This was the law of property, but side by side with it, and, as it would seem, intimately connected with it, there was also that of the Levirate marriage, to the effect that if an Israelite married and died without children, his brother should marry his widow, and if a son should be born of that marriage, that son was to take the name of the deceased man

and inherit his estate, so that the property should not be alienated. Now, when the nearest of kin to such a widow was also her brother-in-law, the widow and the land, through the operation of the two laws, would go together; but when there was no brother-in-law, and yet a childless widow, the Goel who redeemed the land was also expected by custom to marry the widow. This was not laid down by the letter of the statute, but it seems to have been regarded as implied in the spirit of it, and so it became the custom, or what the Scottish people would call "the use and wont."

Now this last was the case of Naomi. In her poverty she wanted to sell for the interval between that date and the year of jubilee the land that had belonged to Elimelech, and this had become known to Boaz. We may suppose, in fact, that Naomi had taken Ruth into her confidence, and that Boaz, having learned from her what her mother-in-law proposed, had seen in that a way to the immediate settlement of the business; for Ruth was as much concerned as Naomi, because, if a kinsman purchased the land, he came also under obligation thereby to make Ruth his wife. Now, so long as this anonymous Goel knew nothing more than that Naomi wanted to sell the land, he expressed his willingness to become the redeemer of it, but the moment he heard that the purchase involved also the obligation to marry Ruth, he renounced his privilege in favour of Boaz, who was the kinsman next after him. The reason which

he gave for doing this is expressed in these words, "lest I mar mine own inheritance;" and it has been explained in two or three different ways. Some have supposed that he had a wife and children already; others, that he feared the risk of losing the perpetuation of his own name in securing that of Elimelech; and others still, that his means could not stand the drain upon them that would be made by the support of Naomi and Ruth, in addition to the finding of the purchase-money. Dr. Cassell suggests that he was moved simply by superstition, and feared that, as Mahlon and Chilion had died so soon after their marriage with two daughters of Moab, a similar fate might befall him if he married Ruth. It is, perhaps, impossible now to say definitely what he referred to. One thing, however, is very clear, namely, that his whole thought was about his own inheritance, and thus selfishness was at the root of his decision. But, in any case, his determination must have been an immense relief to Boaz, who, despite the cool, matter-of-fact way in which he appeared to conduct himself throughout, was far from being indifferent to the issue. I have no doubt that he had a few uncomfortable moments after he heard the Goel say, in regard to the land, "I will redeem it," but when, after he had put the full case before his rival, the irrevocable words were spoken, "Redeem thou instead of me," then would come a great gladness into his heart. Still he did not show his feelings

before the time, and for the formal completion of the transaction there was yet to be gone through an interesting ceremony, which had fallen into abeyance before this book was written, but which helps to prove that there was an intimate connection between the law of the Goel and that of the brother-in-law. The brother-in-law might, if he so chose, refuse to marry the widow of his brother, but if he did so, here is the statute: "If the man like not to take his brother's wife, then let his brother's wife go up to the gate unto the elders, and say, My husband's brother refuseth to raise up unto his brother a name in Israel, he will not perform the duty of my husband's brother. Then the elders of his city shall call him, and speak unto him; and if he stand to it, and say, I like not to take her; then shall his brother's wife come unto him in the presence of the elders, and loose his shoe from off his foot and spit in his face, and shall answer and say, So shall it be done unto that man that will not build up his brother's house, and his name shall be called in Israel, The house of him that hath his shoe loosed."[1] Now, in connection with that quotation from the Book of Deuteronomy, let us read what is said here in the Book of Ruth: "Now this was the manner in former time in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning changing, for to confirm all things; a man plucked off his shoe and gave it to his neighbour: and this was a testimony

[1] Deut. xxxv. 7–10.

in Israel." This old custom originated in the fact that when a man took possession of land he planted his foot—of course with the shoe on it—on the soil. Thus the shoe became the symbol of ownership, and by handing that to another, a man renounced his own title to the land which he was selling, and transferred it to the person who received the shoe. But there was a wide difference between a man's taking off his shoe of his own accord, and having it plucked off by another. I may remove my hat to salute another without any disgrace; but he who knocks my hat from my head insults me. So the plucking off of the shoe by another was an ignominious thing; and thus the Goel who refused to marry his brother's widow was publicly disgraced; and the indignity was further intensified by his being spit upon by his sister-in-law, and by his entailing on himself and his children the opprobrious nickname of "Barefoot," or "Baresole," in all coming time. Now, in the case before us, Boaz did not proceed to such extremities. So far as appears, neither Ruth nor Naomi was present during the proceedings at the gate, and the Goel was permitted to take off his own shoe, while the rest of the penalty was dispensed with. Boaz did not wish to provoke antagonism by proceeding to extremities, or it may be that it was only in the case of the brother-in-law refusing "to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance" that the law was carried out to the letter. Or perhaps Cox is

right when he says: "His motive in thus sparing his kinsman is not simply, I suppose, either a kindly consideration for a man closely related to himself, or his love for Ruth, but also the conviction that an Israelite, caring only for the letter of the law and not for its spirit, might honestly doubt whether he were bound to marry his 'brother's' widow, when that widow was a daughter of Moab. True, Ruth had come to put her trust under the shadow of Jehovah's wings. True, she was known as a good and brave woman in all the city of Bethlehem. But none the less she was by birth an alien, one of the heathen women with whom the sons of Israel were forbidden to intermarry. The law was doubtful: if the appeal to it were pushed too far, he might defeat his own end."[1] So he let the Goel pull off his own shoe, and when he had received it he said to the elders, and to the crowd of people who had by this time assembled round them at the gate: "Ye are witnesses this day, that I have bought all that was Elimelech's, and all that was Chilion's and Mahlon's, of the hand of Naomi. Moreover, Ruth the Moabitess have I purchased to be my wife, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren and from the gate of his place: ye are witnesses this day." To this the elders gave formal response, "We are witnesses," and they and the people vied with each other in their benedic-

[1] *Expositor*, vol. ii. p. 169.

tion of the man who had thus nobly performed the kinsman's part. They use, indeed, the words which have become the recognised formula of benediction in a Jewish marriage; and which, though here, perhaps, employed for the first time, are for that very reason the more significant, inasmuch as they put Ruth the Moabitess side by side with Rachel and Leah, and so indicate that the people of Bethlehem were prepared to receive her into the covenant of promise and the commonwealth of Israel, as no longer a stranger and foreigner, but as a daughter in the household of faith.

So Boaz openly and legally made Ruth his wife, and the fruit of the marriage was a son, who is called the Goel or redeemer of Naomi (chap. iv. 14), because he was accounted her grandson, as standing to her in the place of the son of Mahlon. That this was the light in which he was regarded by all the people is clearly revealed, not only by the tenderness with which Naomi treated him, but also by the fact that it is to her rather than to Ruth that the congratulations of the women of Bethlehem are especially addressed; and by their giving him the name Obed, a servant, indicating that in their view he would be a constant minister to the comfort of Naomi in the time of her old age. Indeed, as Cox, borrowing and condensing the comment of Cassell on this part of the chapter, has said, "It is one of the many fine points of the story that its concluding sentences are almost wholly

devoted, not to the young and happy wife and mother, but to Naomi, who had suffered so many calamities, and who, by the piety and resignation with which she bore them, had drawn Ruth from the idolatries of Moab. It is Naomi, not Ruth, whom 'the women her neighbours' congratulate on the birth of Ruth's son. In him they see Naomi's Goel,—Ruth had already hers in Boaz,—and they pray that as he grows up he may restore her to her former happiness, and be the stay and gladness of her old age."[1] Yet Ruth is not forgotten, for she is spoken of as Naomi's "daughter-in-law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons." We are permitted to see, also, ere the book closes, that in the course of time the little boy "whom Naomi laid in her bosom" became the progenitor of David the darling of Israel, and through him of Jesus the Saviour of the world. Truly, on that wedding-day, as Boaz led home his bride amid the benedictions of his friends and neighbours, some prophetic seer might have addressed her thus:

"Thou knowest not the glorious race,
Sweet Ruth! that shall be thine;
How many kings thou shalt embrace
In thy illustrious line.
The fountains of Hebraic song
Are in thy heart, fair Ruth!
Fountains whose tides are deep and strong
In deathless love and truth.

. . . . . .

[1] *Expositor*, vol. ii. pp. 372, 373.

The great in wisdom and in song,
The bard of deathless fame,
A mighty and a warlike throng,
Shall rise to bless thy name.
And One, at last, of lowly birth,
Shall crown thy long increase,
Of lowly birth, yet not of earth—
The glorious Prince of Peace."

Yes, thou beautiful gleaner! lovely and beloved, we greet thee, too, as a mother of our Lord! The ideal woman of the Old Testament, we place thee side by side with the Mary of the New, while we bow in lowly reverence before Him who is the Son and yet the Lord of both.

Not every story that begins so sadly as this did has so sweet and pleasant an ending. Not always are virtue, piety, constancy, and self-sacrifice so visibly rewarded upon the earth. But we are not on that account to think the less of the providence of God; for virtue is not to be pursued because of its reward, and right is to be done for its own sake—nay, rather, for the sake of God. Then, when the end shall come —not here, but hereafter—we shall see the vindication of Jehovah, and forget all else in the "Well done" of an approving Judge.

I linger only to give point to two lessons which lie on the surface of this narrative.

The first is, that in the matter of marriage, everything ought to be public, open and above-board. How nobly does Boaz appear all through these trans-

actions! He is careful not to infringe upon the right of another, and he contracts for marriage openly before the elders of the people. There was nothing clandestine about his procedure. This was no run-away match, to be formally made in secret haste and bitterly lamented in lifelong leisure. He did not go away from Bethlehem to have it celebrated, without the knowledge of friends and neighbours, but he went about it in the statutory way, and did all things decently and in order. Now, here is an example for young people in similar circumstances. There may be exceptional cases, but, as a rule, clandestine marriages are to be condemned; and if they turn out well, those who have contracted them should thank a gracious Providence rather than congratulate themselves on their own wisdom. There is generally something wrong when either the one party or the other wishes the relationship to be kept a secret; and the very proposal to do that should be itself a danger-signal that ought at once to bring things to a halt; for, as one has well said, "Whenever there is anything in marriage or in its preliminaries that needs smothering up, the wind is sown, and the whirlwind will need to be reaped." Nor can I withhold here the expression of my opinion that the facilities given by the marriage laws, in this State, at least, for the contracting of such clandestine marriages, have much to do with the increase of divorces among us; and I long to see one general marriage law for the whole nation, which, by

requiring public notice to be given beforehand in the place where the parties are known, and by insisting on the production before the clergyman of a certificate that such notice has been given, shall relieve the ministers of the gospel from the applications so constantly made to them to unite in matrimony those who are utter strangers both to them and to the city in which they dwell. Such a marriage law—the same for all the States of the Union, and enacted by the Houses of Congress—would, in my judgment, be one very effectual method of dealing with the marriage problem; but so long as magistrates among us, without any public notice or investigation, can marry all and sundry that come to them, and so long as even ministers of the gospel are sometimes over-persuaded to do what their better judgment disapproves, lest, perhaps, worse consequences should follow, so long we must expect that the institution of the family shall be degraded among us; and that means, ultimately, the degradation of all that is wholesome and conservative in the state.

Finally, we may learn from all this that self-sacrifice is self-saving, and that self-seeking is self-loving. Orpah went back to Moab, and she is heard of no more. Ruth clave to Naomi, and she is canonised among the Old Testament saints, and has a place among the ancestors of our Lord. This nameless Goel was afraid lest his name should perish while he was seeking to perpetuate Mahlon's, and it has

perished in spite of his refusal to be the Goel of Naomi. Boaz did what he declined, and lo! his name stands in everlasting honour, on the first page of the New Testament. "He that loveth his life will lose it, and he that will lose his life for my sake, will keep it unto life eternal." Selfishness outwits itself, but self-sacrifice for Christ's sake issues in the highest gain. Yet if we make the sacrifice for the sake of the gain, it is not self-sacrifice but selfishness. It must be made for Christ's sake, and then Christ Himself will be our reward.

ESTHER THE QUEEN

ESTHER THE QUEEN.

I.

INTRODUCTORY.

THE Book of Esther is one of five Old Testament books which were called by the later Jews "Megilloth," the other four being the Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes. The name "Megilloth" signifies rolls, or volumes, and was probably given to these books because each was read in the synagogue on a special festival day, and was for convenience on such occasions written on a separate roll. Of the five, that of Esther was the most highly esteemed, being sometimes styled simply "Megillah," or the volume. It was read on the day of the feast of Purim, and was elevated to a place above the other sacred books, except those of the Pentateuch. It has always been reckoned in the Old Testament canon, and is "named or implied in almost every enumeration of the books composing

it, from Josephus downward."[1] Moreover, the fact that seven other chapters, additional to those in the Hebrew canon, have been relegated to the Apocrypha as unworthy of a place in Holy Scripture, gives all the greater weight to those which are retained, and is an evidence that some discrimination was exercised by those on whom the decision of such a matter devolved.

In modern times objections have been raised against its canonicity, especially on two grounds: First, because it makes no mention of God; and, second, because it breathes a spirit of narrowness and vindictiveness. Now, as regards the first of these, though we admit that it states a fact, we yet fail to see that it has any force in this connection. For in the book there is no indication of any such *animus* towards God, as would make the omission of His name significant either of antagonism or of contempt. It is quite possible that there might be in a work that had no mention of God's name, such a spirit of irreverence and unbelief as to show that the absence of the divine name was meant to be a slight. But there is nothing of that in the Book of Esther; for though the name of God is not in it, His hand is very manifest all through it, and the sense of His presence is made all the more vivid to the reader by the very silence of the writer. When Jesus, after His resurrection, met His followers at the Lake of

[1] Smith's *Bible Dictionary*, Esther, Book of.

Galilee, they were all sure that it was He; but "none of them durst ask him, Who art thou? knowing that it was the Lord."[1] Their very certainty that it was He kept them silent. Similarly, this writer, whoever he was, takes it so thoroughly for granted that God's providence ordered the things that he records, that he does not think it needful to refer to it; and his silence is not that of unbelief, but of faith. Nay, more, I am not sure but that he produces a deeper impression of God's minute overruling care over His people by his silence than he would have done by any words. An orator may gain his end in the hearts of his hearers in one or other of two ways: either by going before them with an enthusiasm whose infection they are sure to catch, or by, as it were, keeping behind them and studiously holding himself from saying what they all feel that he ought, in consistency with his argument and principles, to say. In the latter case, when he ceases, his hearers go away exclaiming, "Why did he not go further, and declare that this or that should be done at once?" But, as they thus speak, they are all unconsciously manifesting the very spirit which he designed to evoke in them. Now it is on the latter principle that the Book of Esther is constructed, and its very silence concerning God provokes the reader to speak the more emphatically of the fact that His providence is so conspicuous in the history which it recounts. If that had been only

[1] John xxi. 12.

once referred to by the writer, it would not have been nearly so frequently remarked on by the readers, and so a good object has been gained by the course which he has chosen. And, in any case, one who desired to palm off a production of his own for an inspired book, would never have thought of keeping God's name out of his forgery. Indeed, as if to give point to this argument, the very first verse of the apocryphal additions to the book which have been rejected as uncanonical, has this expression: "Then Mordecai said, *God* hath done these things." There is often a use of God's name when there is little regard for God Himself, and sometimes they who know and love Him best are most chary in the utterance of His name. The Scottish shepherd of the olden time always said, when referring to the will of the Supreme, "It's *His* will." And the Waldensian traveller asked to be received simply "In *His* name." I do not know whether that was a more genuine piety, but I am sure that it was deeper than the modern variety, which has the most sacred appellations of the Eternal Father so frequently—I had almost said so flippantly—upon its tongue, and I cannot see, therefore, that the absence of God's name from such a book as we shall find this to be is any valid argument against its canonicity.

As regards the second objection, namely, that it contains the record of the manifestation of a narrow and vindictive spirit, we may answer that the first

indispensable quality of a history is that it be true, and, therefore, if that narrowness of spirit were really there, it would have been false to convey the impression that it was not. Besides, the writer does not necessarily approve of that which he records; and we must not run away with the utterly absurd idea that the God of the Bible indorses everything which is narrated in the Bible. If we are to throw out of the Scriptures as uncanonical every account of such human doings as God must disapprove of, we shall make it a very fragmentary thing, and deprive it of much of its usefulness among men—for, before we get through with the exposition of this book, we may find that those very chapters in it to which more especially this objection is made are fraught with lessons of warning and reproof, which we might not have received, so forcibly at least, if these things had been omitted. We take the Book of Esther, therefore, as canonical. We accept it as an integral part of those Scriptures which Jesus has commanded us to search, and to which He gave His *imprimatur* when He said, "The Scriptures cannot be broken."

But now the question arises, To what precise section of the history of the Jews in the time of the Captivity or Dispersion, does this episode of Esther belong? And the answer to that depends on the settlement of this other, namely, Who was the Ahasuerus—or, giving the name the form which it has in the original, the Achashverosh—of this book? In the first verse of

the first chapter it is said, "This is Ahasuerus which reigned from India even unto Ethiopia, over an hundred and seven and twenty provinces." He was, therefore, Emperor of Persia at the time of the widest extent of that imperial dominion. This at once determines that he could not be before Darius Hystaspis, by whom a portion of India was first annexed to the Persian Empire. The same thing is established by the fact that the royal residence is throughout this book at Susa, and it is well known that the palace there was first built by Darius. Therefore, no ruler prior to him will satisfy the conditions of the history. But neither can we identify Ahasuerus with Darius himself, for, not to say that the character of Ahasuerus, as here depicted, is altogether inconsistent with what we know elsewhere of Darius, we find from other sources that in the third year of his reign Darius was still struggling to maintain his claim to the crown; Media was in revolt, and he himself was at Babylon, so that it would have been impossible for him, at that date, to hold a feast so extended and prolonged as that with the description of which the Book of Esther begins. Again, this Ahasuerus cannot be Artaxerxes Longimanus, for it was in the seventh year of that monarch's reign that he issued the letter which Ezra carried with him to Jerusalem,[1] and which indicates that he was well acquainted with the Jews and their

[1] Ezra vii. 9, 11-28.

peculiar laws; so that he cannot be the man to whom, in the twelfth year of his reign, Haman is represented in this book[1] as speaking of the Jews as if then for the first time they had been brought before his attention. Besides, the mild and humane qualities which come out in the patron of Ezra and Nehemiah are as far as possible from harmonising with the characteristics of this Ahasuerus.

But a later monarch than Artaxerxes Longimanus would be inconsistent with the genealogy of Mordecai, as given in Esther ii. 5, 6; so that we are reduced to the conclusion that the history belongs to the life of a Persian monarch between the reigns of Darius on the one hand and Artaxerxes Longimanus on the other, and that must be Xerxes, the son of Darius and the father of Longimanus, known in history as the unsuccessful invader of Greece. And he satisfies all the conditions of the case. For, first of all, the name Achashverosh is the exact transliteration into Hebrew, consonant for consonant, of the Persian word Kh sh ay ar sha, which is found in some cuneiform inscriptions that have been taken from Persepolis, and which the Greeks and Romans abbreviated into Xerxes.[2]

Again, in the third year of his reign, Xerxes assembled at Susa a great divan, preparatory to his invasion of Greece, corresponding to the feast here

[1] Esther iii. 8.

[2] *The Book of Esther, with Notes and Illustrations*, by The Lowell Hebrew Club, edited by John W. Haley, M.A., pp. 10–12.

described; and in the seventh year of his reign he returned to the same palace after his defeat, and gave himself up to the pleasures of his harem—facts which perfectly harmonise with the statements made and the dates given in the second chapter of this book. Moreover, the Xerxes whom Herodotus portrays exhibits the very same fits of passion, caprice, and cruelty which are here attributed to Ahasuerus. Thus, when Pythias, the rich Lydian who had hospitably entertained the Persian army on its way to Greece, and had offered Xerxes an enormous sum to defray the expenses of the war, asked of him as a favour that the eldest of his five sons, who were all in the army, should be released from military duty and permitted to remain at home with him to be a comfort to his declining years, Herodotus[1] tells us that Xerxes, in a rage, ordered that the young man should be put to death and that his body should be cut in twain, and made his entire army march between the pieces. The same historian informs us that when his famous bridge over the Hellespont was broken up by a storm, Xerxes commanded that the engineers who had superintended its construction should be beheaded; ordered the sea to be scourged, and childishly thought to chain its waves by sinking a few fetters in its depths. He alleges, also, that, after his return from his shameful defeat to Persia, Xerxes sought to solace himself by revelling in sensual pleasures, even though that in-

[1] Littlebury's *Herodotus*, pp. 387, 390, 540, 543.

volved the execution of some of his nearest relatives. Now, all these acts are so thoroughly in keeping with the arbitrary contempt for human feeling and human life which are ascribed to Ahasuerus in this book, that we have no difficulty in identifying the one with the other. But Xerxes began to reign in 486 B.C., and died in 465 B.C., and so the place of this book in Jewish history is between the resumption of work on the Temple by the returned exiles under Joshua and Zerubbabel, when Haggai and Zechariah prophesied, and the mission of Ezra to his countrymen, and it belongs chronologically to the long interval which elapsed between the things related in the sixth and those mentioned in the seventh chapters of the Book of Ezra.

This being the case, we can at once realise to ourselves the condition of the Jews at the time. The first instalment of those who had returned to labour for the restoration of their nationality and worship had been now in Jerusalem for fifty-three years, contending for some of these with cunning and malignant adversaries; but the rest of the descendants of the captives had elected to remain in the cities of their dispersion, where they were kindly treated and fairly prosperous, and were not, it is to be feared, either so exalted in patriotism, so heroic in character, or so self-forgetting in piety as those of whom we read in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. But they were not neglected by their God. There was as real a

providence in their remaining where they were as there was in the return of the others to their own land; for, if the latter prepared a Palestine for the appearance of the Messiah, the former made ready a means of communication between Jews and Gentiles against the coming of the time when the gospel should be preached by Jews to all nations under heaven.

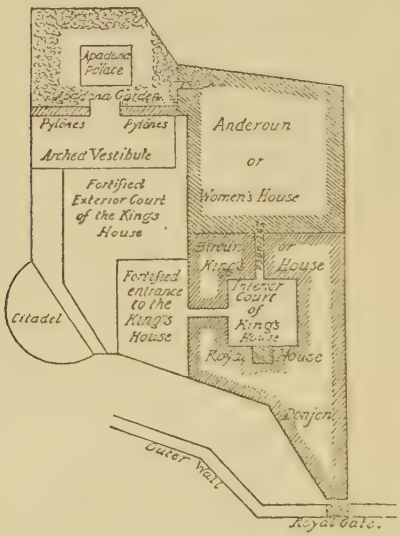
The scene of the story is from first to last in Shushan, or Susa, and it may be well, once for all, to give a description of the place. The site has been found in lat. 32° 10′ N., long. 48° 26′ E., between the rivers Shapur and Dizful. It was originally the capital of the country called in Scripture Elam, and by the classical writers, sometimes Kissia, and sometimes Sus or Susiana. Its ruins cover a space about six thousand feet long from east to west by four thousand five hundred feet from north to south. The circumference of the whole is about three miles. They were explored in part in the year 1851 by General Williams, and the exploration was resumed in the following year by Mr. Loftus. "Coming from the west, the traveller crosses the Shapur, a small stream flowing southward, and finds himself at the base of the smallest, but loftiest" (of the four mounds which now mark the site), "its extreme altitude above the river being one hundred and nineteen feet, and the circuit at the summit two thousand eight hundred and fifty feet. This mound doubtless represents the citadel of Shushan. Close

by on the north-east rises a considerable square mass of some four thousand feet in circuit. Upon this have been discovered foundations of a magnificent hall of columns, erected by Darius Hystaspis, consisting of thirty-six pillars arranged in rows of six each, and flanked on three sides at a distance of sixty-three and a half feet by double rows of pillars, six in each row. To the south-east of these mounds, and separated from them by narrow valleys, is a great platform of sixty acres, which reaches elevations of from forty to seventy feet, and is three thousand feet long on the east side. These three mounds together form a diamond-shaped block, having its angles nearly to the cardinal points, and including above one hundred acres of surface."[1]

More recently the explorations begun by General Williams and Mr. Loftus have been laboriously prosecuted by M. Dieulafoy. These have been described by Madame Dieulafoy in an article published in *Harper's Magazine* for June 1887, and by M. Dieulafoy himself in a lecture before the *Société des Études Juives*, in Paris, April 1888, of which a translation has appeared in the *Bibliotheca Sacra* for October 1889. The plan of the palace is given by him in the accompanying illustration, which will be made more intelligible by the following extracts from the lecture itself: "The palace was composed of

[1] *The Book of Esther*, by The Lowell Hebrew Club, pp. 96, 97.

three groups of distinct apartments, each surrounded by a special enclosure, but included within the same fortress. The *Apadàna*, or throne-room, resembled in its arrangement, and by its hypostyle architecture, a Grecian temple. The king occupied in the tabernacle the place of the statue of the deity. The



GROUND-PLAN OF THE PALACE OF AHASUERUS AT SUSA.

hall at Susa covers nearly a hectare (between two and three acres): the porticoes, the stair-ways, the enclosures, were spread out upon a terrace, the area of which was eighteen times as large, and was divided into two parts by a pylon. On one side a gigantic

stair-way led to the outside parade on a level with a wide esplanade. On the other side, sparkling in its crown of emeralds, overshadowed by the foliage of a hanging garden, was the *Apadàna*, where were received the ambassadors of all the States of Greece. The private apartments of the sovereign were distant from the *Apadàna*, and grouped around an interior court, with the hall of audience, bedrooms, apartments appropriated to the chancellor's office, to the military house, to the guard, to the dependants. In modern Persian, this part of the palace is called the *Birun* (exterior), in contrast to the *Anderoun* (interior harem), reserved for the women. The *Anderoun* comprises the apartments of the queens and quite a large number of cells for the concubines of second rank, and for the postulants for the royal favours. The master of this department is not so much the king, as the grand eunuch. The *Anderoun* of Susa, walled, padlocked, and more tightly closed—I speak only from a constructive point of view—than even the most rigorous prison, is protected by the buildings of the *Birun* and the *Apadàna*. The last two, recognisable in the accompanying plan by their separation, and by the tower (keep) connected with the private dwelling of the king, occupy the two branches of a gigantic L, whose transept was reserved for the women's apartments. Leaving the *Anderoun* by the west door, one would step out directly into the gardens of the *Apadàna;* walking towards the

south, one would cross the *Birun.* The palace had numerous entrances. I will mention the fortified gate of the king's house, and the gate of the general enclosure which opened to the south of the tower, and was the means of communication between the acropolis and the city of Susa."[1] It was, according to M. Dieulafoy, at this gate that Mordecai was wont to sit, and it was in the *Apadàna* that the banquet described in the first chapter of the Book of Esther was held. It is interesting to add that, although he speaks of the *legend* of Esther, M. Dieulafoy has declared that "the excavations at Susa not only confirm the architectural descriptions of the Book of Esther, but even the smallest details of the story,"[2] and affirms that "the epoch in which the Hebrew version of the book was written may be fixed in the fourth century, B.C.," and that "it was written honestly at Susa by a Susian Jew, and goes back for its Hebrew compilation to this side of the accession of Artaxerxes Mnemon, and far beyond the Parthian conquest."[3] The importance of these details, both for the illustration and defence of the book, must be my apology for the length of the quotations which I have made.

As to the authorship of the book nothing certain can now be determined, but some have supposed that the twentieth and twenty-first verses of the

[1] *Bibliotheca Sacra*, October 1889, pp. 638, 639.
[2] *Idem*, p. 646. [3] *Idem*, p. 653.

ninth chapter, which say, "Mordecai wrote these things, and sent letters unto all the Jews that were in all the provinces of the King Ahasuerus, to stablish this among them, that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, yearly," are equivalent to an assertion that Mordecai was the author. The reference of these verses, however, is to the establishment of the feast of Purim, and they are too narrow a foundation on which to build the inference that he wrote the whole book, however otherwise probable that may have been. Others have ascribed its production to Ezra, and others still to Joiakim the high-priest; but these are only guesses, as also is the opinion of Rawlinson[1] that "it was written by a younger contemporary of Mordecai, who put the facts on record towards the middle of the reign of Artaxerxes Longimanus, when they were in danger of being forgotten by the passing away of the generation that had witnessed them." The writer has kept his own name, as such, out of his book, as well as the name of God. For what reason he has done so, or who he was, or in what circumstances he wrote—all these are equally unknown. But the book itself is not discredited any more than is the Epistle to the Hebrews, by its being anonymous, for it bears throughout the marks of its veracity. As we have seen, the name Achashverosh is the exact transliteration into Hebrew of the Persian

[1] *Speaker's Commentary*, vol. iii. p. 470.

name of Xerxes; its chronology harmonises exactly with that elsewhere given of the early years of that monarch's reign, and his character as depicted here is precisely parallel with that which comes out in other histories of his doings, while the descriptions of the manners and customs of the Persian court are so minute and so accurate as to convey the impression that the story in which these occur is thoroughly authentic. It is indeed true that we have no direct confirmation of the narrative from profane history, but no other book treats of the same times in such a way as to come into comparison with it. As Rawlinson has said: "No contradiction is to be found between it and the established facts of history. On the contrary, the narrative is in harmony with those facts: completes very happily the portraiture of Xerxes and his court; agrees with, but goes beyond, the descriptions of Persian life and manners which have otherwise come down to us; has the air of being by a contemporary; and, if untrue, might have easily been proved to be untrue at the time when it was published, by reference to the extant 'book of the chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia,' which it quotes."[1] Nor must we forget that the feast of Purim has been observed by the Jews annually from the very time of the occurrences which are here recorded down to our own days, and is thus, to the incidents of the Book of Esther, what the Passover is

[1] *Speaker's Commentary*, vol. iii. p. 472.

to the Exodus, or the Lord's Supper to the passion of our Saviour.

On the whole, therefore, we conclude that though the author of this book is unknown, its credibility and canonical authority are thoroughly established; that the facts which it records occurred in the reign of Xerxes, otherwise known to us as the unsuccessful invader of Greece; that its chronological place among the books of the Bible is after Daniel, and the first six chapters of Ezra; and that it narrates the history of an important crisis in the experience of the Jews of the Dispersion, just sixteen years before Artaxerxes issued the letter which Ezra carried with him to the governors beyond the river, and twenty-nine years before Nehemiah exchanged for a season his post of cup-bearer in the palace of Shushan for that of restorer and governor of Jerusalem.

We have thus taken our historical bearings, and may now intelligently proceed to the exposition of the book itself. But we cannot enter upon that now, and we conclude these preliminary statements with Matthew Henry's somewhat quaint yet very pertinent and pithy summary to this effect: "It is the narrative of a plot laid against the Jews, to cut them off, and wonderfully disappointed by a concurrence of providences. The most compendious exposition of it will be to read it deliberately altogether at one sitting; for the latter events expound the former, and show what Providence intended in

them. . . . The particulars are not only surprising and very entertaining, but edifying and very encouraging to the faith and hope of God's people, in the most difficult and dangerous times. We cannot now expect such miracles to be wrought for us as were for Israel when they were brought out of Egypt; but we may expect that, in such ways as God here took to defeat Haman's plot, He will still protect His people. . . . The whole story confirms the Psalmist's observation: 'The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth. The Lord shall laugh at him: for He seeth that his day is coming.'"[1]

[1] Psalm xxxvii. 12, 13.

II.

A GREAT FEAST AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

ESTHER i. 1–22.

AFTER the full description of Shushan the palace, given in the last lecture, there is no need now to say more concerning the place at which the feast described in this opening chapter was held. The festivities lasted, as we are told, for a hundred and eighty days, and the long continuance of such occasions among the Persians has been particularly remarked upon by ancient writers. But probably the statement in the narrative before us does not imply that precisely the same persons sat down in the same gorgeously pillared banquet-hall day after day for half a year. For the guests were "all the princes and servants, the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces;" and it is hardly likely that all the chief representatives of the emperor, from India to Ethiopia, were simultaneously absent for so long a time from their seats of government. It may be that they came in relays, and that as the first comers went, others took their places;

while as these departed they were replaced by others, until all of them had been received and entertained. Perhaps, therefore, the writer simply means to say that the festive time lasted for half a year; that during all these six months state banquets were frequent; that at their close, the object contemplated by the emperor having been attained, a fête of seven days was given to the inhabitants of Shushan itself, and that in the gardens surrounding the palace they were regaled with the choicest meats and the richest wines, while all around them were the most gorgeous fabrics which skill could make or wealth could purchase.

Now, concerning this great festival, some particulars are noteworthy. The occasion on which it was held must not be lost sight of, though the author of this book passes it over in silence. It was the third year of the reign of Xerxes. Now, we know from the Greek historian Herodotus, that in that very year Xerxes "summoned a council of the principal Persians, as well to hear their opinions as to declare his own," on the matter of the invasion of Greece. At first, on his accession to the throne, we are told that "he showed little disposition to make war against Greece, and turned his thoughts to the reduction of Egypt;" but after he had succeeded in Egypt, he was all the more inclined to listen to the advice of his cousin Mardonius, and seek to punish the Athenians for the defeat of his father at Mara-

thon. Accordingly, at the council assembled in Shushan, he declared his purpose "to lay a bridge over the Hellespont, and to transport an army into Greece that he might punish the Athenians for the injuries they had done to the Persians and to his father." Nay, not content with that, he added: "I intend, with your concurrence, to march through all the parts of Europe, and to reduce the whole earth into one empire; being well assured that no city or nation of the world will dare to resist my arms after the reduction of those I have mentioned."[1]

He was opposed by his uncle, Artabanus, but ultimately, under the influence of Mardonius and some illusory oracles which fell in with his own ambition, the die was cast, and the decision was made to prepare for and carry out the invasion of Greece with such an army as the world had never before seen.

Now, it was in connection with this determination, and in order, as I believe, to give the greatest possible impulse to the carrying out of the enterprise so resolved on, that this long-continued fête was held. The author of the Book of Esther, indeed, merely says that his desire was "to show the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty;" but that is in nowise inconsistent with the supposition that his purpose in showing these things was to give éclat to the undertaking on which

[1] See Herodotus, Book vii., *passim*.

he was entering, and to remove from the minds of his satraps all misgiving concerning its success. He wanted to produce in them the conviction that, with such resources as he had at his command, it was impossible that he should fail. This accounts for the magnificent scale on which everything was done. The pillars were of marble; the couches were of gold; the pavement was of tessellated marble; there was royal wine without stint, and each one drank out of a vessel of gold, which was of a different design from all the rest. Everything was luxuriant and expensive. Ostentation was the order of the day. The great end which the monarch had in view was to make a display, and he made it with more than the usual Oriental regardlessness of cost, so that there might not be left in any mind a single lingering suspicion of the sufficiency of his resources for the great expedition to which he was summoning his subjects. It looks supremely foolish, but it is a folly that keeps its ground to this day even in western lands—where it is still the fashion for men to banquet themselves into enthusiasm for some great railway enterprise or some party campaign. Truly, we have not learned so much in these modern days as we think we have, and it might be wisdom in us to unlearn a few of the extravagances in which we are so prone to indulge.

But one feature of this feast given by Xerxes strikes us as praiseworthy. It is said that "the drinking was according to the law, none did compel."

All were left to do according to their own pleasure. He that partook did not despise him who abstained, and he that abstained did not endeavour to force his practice on him who partook. Each was at perfect liberty to do as his own judgment dictated. Now, when we contrast that with the custom which used to be maintained by our fathers, of pressing guests to drink whether they would or not, until it became difficult—almost impossible—for them, indeed, decently to refuse, we must confess that the difference is all in favour of the ancient Persians; and the statement here made reminds us of an incident which is said to have occurred at the table of Queen Victoria in one of the early years of her reign. The temperance movement was then just beginning to make its way into the upper classes of English society, and, on the occasion to which I refer, a British nobleman, well known for his activity in all good causes, declined to comply with the request of one of his fellow-guests that he should drink wine with him, whereupon the appeal was made to her Majesty that she should assert her authority in the case; but she nobly replied, in the spirit of this Persian law, "There shall be no compulsion at my table;" and that reply did much to discountenance the old custom of badgering, and browbeating, and insisting upon guests to drink out of regard for their hosts until they felt themselves in a position where it was difficult to refuse, and were virtually compelled

either to act against their better judgment, or to do that which was considered rude and unmannerly. We have reason to be thankful that, alike in Great Britain and in this land, the Temperance Reformation has gained such a footing that now, as Dr. Raleigh says,[1] "within the whole sphere of what is called society, anything approaching compulsion would not be tolerated, and, in fact, is never attempted." Much more is needed, as we shall presently see, before we shall have succeeded in purging ourselves from the plague of intemperance; but that is at least one point gained, and the gaining of that is due, more than to any other influence among us, to the efforts of our temperance societies.

Another feature of this feast was the absence of the ladies from the board. They had their own festival, indeed, but they held it by themselves; because then, as indeed they are throughout the East until this day, the women were kept in uttermost seclusion, and, according to the public opinion of the time, it would have been in the highest degree immodest for any of them to be present on such an occasion as the banquet given by the emperor to the inhabitants of Shushan. It was no great privation to the ladies, but their absence was fraught with danger to the men, for it left them without any check to indulge to the full in the revelries of the hour; and in bygone times among

[1] *The Book of Esther: Its practical Lessons and Dramatic Scenes*, by Alexander Raleigh, D.D., p. 15.

ourselves it was only after the ladies had left the table that the men permitted themselves to drink to excess, and to retail stories that were utterly unfit for modest women to hear or a modest man to tell. It is to be feared that this is the case still in some circles that call themselves polite, but it ought everywhere to be frowned upon and put down.

In the case before us, the law that none should be compelled to drink was largely neutralised by the example of Xerxes himself, for towards the end of the feast he became heated with wine, and then was guilty of an act which stamps him as essentially a low, sensual, and unfeeling tyrant; for he gave orders that Vashti, his queen, his favourite wife and the chief inmate of his harem, should appear among the revellers "with the crown royal, to show the people and the princes her beauty." His design apparently was that she should come unveiled, in order that all should envy him the possession of such a lovely wife. If Ahasuerus is to be identified with Xerxes, it is probable that Vashti is the same as the Amestris who is spoken of by the Greeks as the wife of Xerxes, and whom he must have wedded before his accession to the throne. But, however that may have been, the command of the king required her to do what was inconsistent with national usage, and as such would have been regarded as a violation of her modesty. Her obedience to it would have degraded her not only in her own estimation, but also in that of the

whole community. According to the public sentiment of the time, she could not view the order otherwise than as an insult to her womanhood and a slur upon her honour. Therefore she set it at defiance, and refused "to come at the king's commandment."

Opinions have differed concerning the wisdom of her conduct, and some, who apparently think it needful to degrade Vashti in order to exalt Esther, have condemned her for her disobedience. But, for my part, I consider it worthy of all praise, and hold that she was entirely right in what she did. It is true that by the appointment of God the husband is the head of the wife, but the headship is not absolute and autocratic. Here, too, the government must be constitutional and within limits which have been fixed by the Lord Himself. No husband has a right to command a wife to do that which is wrong, and liberty of conscience ought to be as sacred in the home as in the State. In all matters of indifference morally, in all questions of mere prudence, in all affairs of management and detail where no principle is involved, if there should be an honest difference of opinion between the two, the will of the husband should be carried out, and no true wife will ever think of doing otherwise; but where conscience is concerned, where principle is at stake, where character is affected, the wife should be left to act upon her own convictions, and no right-thinking husband

would ask her to do otherwise. This, as it seems to me, is the constitution on which household government rests; and though it is always an evidence that there is something radically wrong when the matter comes to be disputed, yet the knowledge of these limits may keep things from coming to such a pass, and may lead to that mutual respect for each other's convictions as to duty which is essential alike to domestic peace and to loyalty to God on the part both of husband and wife.

The reply of Vashti set Xerxes on fire with rage; and his counsellors being, like himself, heated with wine, and so all the more likely to be the mere "dittoes" of their master, did not mend matters by their advice. To think of conquering Greece while he allowed a woman to set him at defiance was in their view absolutely absurd. They feared, withal, that the spirit of Vashti might become infectious and spread throughout their own harems, and so they insisted that Xerxes should put Vashti away, and gave also a recommendation, the result of which is thus recorded: "The saying pleased the king and the princes; and the king did according to the word of Memucan: for he sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that it should be published according to the language of every people." What a "ridiculous

mouse" is this, as the fruit of such "labour" in the "mountains"! One can hardly keep from laughing outright as he reads the words. Truly, family government is near an end when it needs to be bolstered up by an imperial decree! And what mere edict can make a man worthy to bear rule in his own house? for, after all, the gist of the matter lies there. A man must rule himself first, if he would regulate well the affairs of his own household, and for self-rule something else is needed than an imperial decree. "Truly," as Dr. Kitto says, "one is amazed at the infantine simplicity of these famous sages in recommending the issue of a royal decree, in all the languages of this great empire, 'that every man should bear rule in his own house.' This is undoubtedly one of the most amusing things in all history. One cannot but imagine the inextinguishable burst of shrill merriment which rang through every one of 'the hundred and twenty-seven' provinces of the Persian Empire when this sage decree was promulgated."[1] It must be that Ahasuerus and Xerxes are identical, for only one who could imagine that he could bind the Hellespont with a few iron fetters, could have supposed that he could reduce women into absolutely passive submission to the autocracy of their husbands by the publication of an edict! Not thus is domestic peace or household happiness to be attained. When the law comes into that relationship, alas! it is to divide and not to unite;

[1] *Daily Bible Illustrations*, vol. iv. p. 487.

and when the apostle's command, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it," is faithfully obeyed by those to whom it is addressed, there will be no need of a civil enactment to enforce this other: "Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything." But if a man makes himself heated with wine, and issues orders that are abominable, he only makes himself ridiculous when he talks of his determination "to rule his own house." He has ceased to be the ruler of himself; and if a man know not how to be that, he is incapable of ruling his house.

But now let us pick up a few lessons from this old history that may be useful to us in our daily lives. And, first of all, we are reminded by the incidents which have passed under our review that over-confidence is the forerunner of failure. The proverb says that "pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall;" and Ahab showed more wisdom than was common with him when he sent to Ben-hadad this message: "Tell him, Let not him that girdeth on his harness boast himself as he that putteth it off."[1] With an empire so large as to be already unwieldy, Xerxes might well have been content with what he had; yet he must needs seek to wipe out the disgrace of his father's defeat at Marathon by the Greeks, and try for universal empire for him-

[1] 1 Kings xx. 11.

self. But as the unsuccessful gambler stakes more heavily than before, thinking to recover thereby all that he has lost, and ends by losing more heavily than ever, so Xerxes suffered a more disgraceful defeat than his father. The little country of Greece hurled back his legions in dismay, and wrought prodigies of valour which have been for an inspiration to all who have battled for freedom in the world ever since, and which have made the name of Thermopylæ everlastingly renowned, while the defeat of his fleet at Salamis, even though he sat himself upon a lofty throne in sight of all his ships to stir his sailors to enthusiasm by his presence, was so speedy and so complete as to give point to Byron's lines:

> "A king sat on the rocky brow
> That looks o'er sea-born Salamis,
> And ships in thousands lay below
> And men in nations—all were his;
> He counted them at break of day,
> But when the sun set, where were they?"

Nor are we without an interest in the victory they won, for it was one of the decisive days of the world, and but for it Oriental despotism might still have brooded over the fairest countries of Europe, and the whole history of the world been changed. Now, I do not say that Xerxes failed simply because he was so confident that he would succeed; or that, if he had begun his campaign of invasion with less of ostentation and bravado, he would have conquered. But the issue of his expedition contrasts very suggestively with

the braggadocio of its beginning, and is a warning to all not to rejoice over a victory until it has been won. There have been many similar cases in history. As we read the account of this banquet, we cannot help thinking of the spirit in which the first Napoleon began his march to Russia, and the terrible result of his obstinate rashness on that occasion. Nor can we forget how within these last few weeks[1] the King Milan, of Servia, has been reproved for his Thrasonic declaration, that he would keep his birthday in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. But the lesson is good for other departments than that of war, and it reads thus: Young man, don't say with conceited boasting what you will do, but do it, and let the deed speak both for itself and you. See first, however, that it be a deed worth doing, and not merely the gratification of a selfish and unscrupulous ambition.

But, in the second place, let us note here the evils of intemperance. If Xerxes had not been "heated with wine," he never would have given such an order to Vashti. Mark the phrase "heated with wine." It does not say that he was actually drunk. I call your attention to that, because I believe that a vast deal of evil is wrought in the world by drinking that is short of intoxication. As M'Crie has admirably put it, "There is a difference between not being intoxicated and being sober. A person may be able to speak and to walk, and yet may be guilty of excess in

[1] This was written in January 1886.

the use of strong drink. He may not have lost the use of his senses, and yet have lost the sound use of his senses."[1] It is my firm belief that the great majority of accidents in the use of machinery or of dangerous agencies, such as steam, electricity, and the like, is due to this kind of drinking. The man has taken enough to disturb the balance of his nature. His conceit and confidence are stimulated; his judgment is weakened; his will is stiffened, and he is made reckless when otherwise he would have been cautious. If an inquiry were to be held, it could not be affirmed by any one that he was drunk. But, for all that, he had been guilty of what for him was excess. Now, in these circumstances, does not prudence dictate that the man should let it alone altogether? His own safety and the safety of others are imperilled by his partaking of it even in what others would call moderation, and therefore he ought always to be on his guard; and, as the surest means of keeping right, he had better abstain entirely.

But if that be so with drinking that is short of intoxication, what must be said of the actual drunkenness which is so rampant in the midst of us? It is a large question, and I cannot discuss it fully here. Let me only remark that the question has three departments, according as we look at the drunkard's appetite, the drinking customs, and the liquor trade.

[1] *Lectures on Esther*, by Thomas M'Crie, D.D., American edition, pp. 31, 32.

Now, as to the first of these: when a man is held in the grasp of the drunkard's appetite there is no cure for him save in absolute and entire abstinence. His indulgence has so diseased his body that he cannot taste it without having created in him an irresistible craving for more. Clearly, therefore, he should never touch it again; and to encourage him in taking that course Christian love should prompt others to take it with him, and to say, "If drink make my brother to offend, I will drink no wine while the world stands. It is good neither to drink wine nor to do anything whereby a brother stumbleth or is made weak." That is the true scriptural ground on which the total abstinence movement rests, and to put it on any other basis is to weaken its appeal to Christian men.

Looking now at the drinking customs, the cure is to abolish and discredit them. I think it is capable of proof that the existing customs in the matter of drink are very largely responsible for the manufacture of drunkards. So long as strong drink is the recognised medium of showing kindness or hospitality to a friend or companion, so long shall we have to deplore the fall of many young and noble men into intemperate habits. Therefore, smite these customs as with the hammer of Thor. Destroy them out of society and the land. Put away strong drink from the table as a beverage, and never conform to the custom of indulging in it as a mere libation to fashion. Why should a man to whom you have shown a kindness say to you,

"Come and have a drink," and you do not laugh at him as you would if he said, "Here is a baker's shop; come and have a cake"? Or why would everybody laugh at me at a banquet if I should say, "Let us eat to the health of the President," and should hold up the wing of a chicken on the point of my fork for the purpose; while, if I should say, "Let us drink to the health of the President," everybody would cheer? Intrinsically the one is as ridiculous as the other. Only the custom makes the difference, and that custom carries drunkenness with it as its lawful progeny. Dethrone the customs, therefore, and set something worthier in their room. Much has been done in this way already, but there is need for the doing of a great deal more, and no patriot should be reluctant to put his hand to such a work.

Then, last of all, there comes in the trade aspect of the case. The trade is licensed by the law. In one view that may mean that it is encouraged by the law; and it does seem very inconsistent to license people to sell strong drink, and then to keep a staff of policemen, and judges, and a whole assortment of prisons, for dealing with those who are demoralised by their wares. But, on the other side of it, a licensed trade is a trade already restricted; it is a trade prohibited to all who are not licensed. It is, therefore, prohibition so far forth; and so in every licence law the principle is involved that the State has the right to prohibit that which it licenses only a certain

number to do. Thus the principle of prohibition is already recognised. Ought we, therefore, to have total prohibition immediately? To that I answer, Let us have it just so far and so soon as the public sentiment will sustain its enforcement. We must not forget that a State enactment in and of itself will not secure obedience in this case any more than it could secure in the case of Xerxes that every man should bear rule in his own house. Any law is dead until the breath of public opinion is breathed into it, and then it lives. And if with your law you go far ahead of public opinion, you thereby provoke a reaction, and therefore injure rather than advance your cause. What we have to do, therefore, in the matter of legislation of a prohibitory character, is, when public opinion has forced the wheel round to a certain point, to put on the ratchet of a law and hold it there, with no backward movement possible, until we are ready for another advance, and thus, step by step, we shall get on towards the goal that so many desire to reach. Meanwhile every man can pass a prohibitory law on himself, and enforce that if he will—and that will prove his own sincerity in the matter.

Finally, we are reminded here of the great change which the gospel has wrought on the position of woman. The separation of the sexes in this feast, and the insult shown to Vashti, are only typical of the treatment to which woman has been subjected in all heathen lands. Wherever the gospel has not

gone, woman has been degraded into a slave and ground down beneath the galling tyranny of her husband. The barbarian of the East and the savage of the West have been alike in this, that they have driven the weakest to the wall, and she who was designed to be a helpmeet and companion to her husband — doubling his joys, dividing his sorrows, and throwing a halo for him round his home—has been trampled under the hoof of cruelty and branded with the scars of violence. We are far enough yet from what we ought to be in this respect even in our own Christian land, but there is even among us an immense improvement over the state of things in ancient Greece and Rome, as well as over the condition of matters at this day in Turkey and Hindostan; and the change has been entirely due to the Gospel of Christ. Not by any sudden and violent upheaval indeed was it effected. Had it been so, the civilised world would have been more conscious of its obligation to the Lord Jesus for it. But silently, gently, almost imperceptibly, the influence of Christianity filtered into the family, and there, touching the mainspring of our human life, it has purified and ennobled society at large. "What women these Christians have," said a Pagan orator, who had been a teacher of Chrysostom, with a true perception of the influence of the gospel on them, for the religion of Jesus gave dignity to womanhood, holiness to motherhood, and happiness to the home.

And, as an eloquent friend has said, "It is a fact significant for the past, prophetic for the future, that even as Dante measured his successive ascents in Paradise, not by immediate consciousness of movement, but by seeing an ever lovelier beauty in the face of Beatrice, so the race now counts the gradual steps of its spiritual progress out of the ancient heavy gloom towards the glory of the Christian millennium, not by mechanisms nor cities, but by the ever new grace and force exhibited by the woman, who was for ages either the decorated toy of man or his despised and abject drudge."[1] My sisters, have you not in this a new reason why you should value the gospel and be loyal to its Lord? And you, my brothers, who have so largely profited by this social regeneration, will you not hold with a firmer hand, because of all this, the truth, which the anarchists of these days are seeking to wrench out of your grasp.

[1] *The Divine Origin of Christianity*, by R. S. Storrs, D.D., p. 156.

III.

THE ORPHAN MAIDEN.

ESTHER ii.

WHEN in their progress westward the kings of Assyria or Babylon had subdued any important city or territory, they adopted the plan of carrying its inhabitants to some of their Eastern possessions, and supplying their places by colonists sent from other provinces. In this way certain results valuable to the conquerors, at least, were secured. They filled the conquered place with settlers on whose loyalty they could rely, and thus freed themselves from the necessity of constantly occupying it with a large armed force; they peopled the great cities which they were building in the East with inhabitants, and by removing the captives from their homes and scattering them over a wide area, they broke up the sentiment of nationality among them, so that within two or three generations they came, for the most part, to be merged in the general population of the empire.

While, however, this method of deporting a con-

quered community from their own land to another is called a captivity, we should err if we were to suppose that the exiles were held in slavery, properly so called. They were, indeed, prevented from returning to their own country, but in every other respect they were treated like the other subjects of the empire. So far as appears in history, no interference with their religious belief or worship was attempted, save on very rare occasions, and posts of honour and emolument were as open to them as they were to others. They were thus encouraged to become identified with the empire, and were, as a rule, treated in such a way as to bind them as firmly as possible to the throne.

By such captivities in the year 740 or 741 B.C., and again in the year 720 B.C., the ten tribes of Israel were carried away by the kings of Assyria, and so thoroughly were they amalgated with those among whom they were dispersed that all efforts to trace out their subsequent history have been thus far in vain. Rather more than a century later, a similar fate befell the tribes of the kingdom of Judah, who were carried away at different times by the rulers of Babylon. Seven such captivities in all have been enumerated by historians, but of these three have been considered more important than the others. The first was in 605 B.C., when Daniel and his companions were among those removed; the second in 598 or 597 B.C., when Jeconiah, otherwise called

Jehoiachin, with all the nobles, military officers, and skilled artificers were taken away; and the third in 582 B.C., when Zedekiah was led away blind and childless to the metropolis of his conqueror, and Jerusalem was laid waste.

Following Jeremiah's advice that they should seek the peace of the land to which they should be carried,[1] the great majority of the captives settled down in their new homes to business pursuits, and some of them rose to the highest offices about the court and in the empire; so that when, in consequence of the edict of Cyrus, Zerubbabel set out with a large number of his countrymen on their return to Jerusalem, a great many more declined to accompany him, and preferred to remain in the places which had now become their homes. No formal condemnation is anywhere in Scripture pronounced upon those who thus stayed behind; but we may infer that, as a rule, but with striking exceptions, such as Daniel and Nehemiah, they were largely indifferent to the restoration of the Temple and worship of their fathers. They were neither the most patriotic nor the most spiritual of their people; but still they preserved their distinctiveness, and were as really separate from those among whom they resided as the Jews are to-day among ourselves.

Now it is to one of these, Mordecai by name, that we are introduced in the narrative which lies before

[1] Jeremiah xxix. 7.

us this evening. His great-grandfather, Kish, a Benjamite, as we might have concluded from his name, even if the record had not clearly told us, had been carried away 114 or 115 years before the date of our story, along with Jehoiachin the King of Judah. This is itself an evidence that he belonged to the better portion of the Jews, for only those who might be called the upper classes were taken to Babylon at that time. How it fared with him and his household we have now no means of knowing, but here we come upon his great-grandson, settled in the city of Shushan. What he did there before he obtained the office which required him to sit in the gate of the king, or whether he at this time held that office, we cannot tell. But we infer that he was in comfortable circumstances, and we are warranted also in saying that he had a kindly heart; for we find under his roof an orphan cousin, whom he had adopted as his ward, and whom he had supported and educated from a very tender age. Her father, Abihail, was the son of Shimei and brother of Jair,[1] so he was the uncle of Mordecai; and when he and his wife died, leaving their daughter without any earthly protector, Mordecai "took her for his own daughter," and "brought her up." At the date of this chapter it is probable that he was about forty years of age, and his maiden cousin about twenty. She had grown up into a beautiful woman, answering alike to her Hebrew name, Hadassah,

[1] Esther ii. 15, ix. 29.

which means Myrtle, and her Persian designation, Esther, which means a star. It is delightful to come in such a place on such a manifestation of kindness as that shown by Mordecai to Esther. He might have shaken her off, on the plea that he could do nothing with a girl, or on the ground that she had no legal claim upon him, or on some manufactured pretext; but instead, he opened his heart and his home for her admission, and we do not doubt that she carried a blessing with her to her guardian's house. If she increased his care, she would also double his happiness, and in his nights of affliction or distress her "starry" radiance would cheer him with its sparkling lustre, while her budding beauty would be to him a constant joy.

But, alas! that very beauty was to bring to an end the idyllic sweetness of this pure and holy home life. For now we must return to Xerxes. After the feast was over and Vashti had been displaced, and the monarch began to realise what he had done when he had decreed that "she should come no more before him," he missed his favourite wife—for, as we may well believe from the spirit which she showed when he insulted her with his drunken command, she had been more to him than a mere beautiful toy, and her companionship had been both profitable and delightful. He began to feel that he had been hasty, and possibly there were thoughts of recalling and reinstating her shaping themselves in his mind. But if she

returned to her old place, woe betide those who had counselled Xerxes to put her away; for then their time would come, and their destruction would be sure and swift. So, for their own protection, they counselled the king to take steps for putting another into her place; and the advice they gave shows what sort of men they were and what sort of master they served, as well as what sort of time they lived in. We need not go into the particulars; suffice it to say that they resulted in the levying of a "maiden tribute" from all the provinces of the empire for the gratification of the royal lust, and that he might choose from among them a successor to Vashti. Among those thus taken from their homes to the royal seraglio for that purpose was the beautiful Esther. Some have supposed that this change in Esther's life was brought about by the diplomacy of Mordecai; others have argued that it was with his consent, and some have even gone so far in absurdity as to affirm that Mordecai, in procuring the admission of Esther into the harem, was acting under special divine guidance. But all these opinions are wide of the mark. The real, but terribly sad truth was, that, when the officers, appointed to gather together all the fair young virgins into Shushan the palace, saw Esther, they took possession of her, without asking either her consent or Mordecai's, in the king's name, and carried her away, just as they would have done with any chattel that was required for the payment of a tax. The autocratic theory was

that all subjects belonged to the king, to be used at his pleasure; and this was only one particular instance under that general law. It would have made no matter, therefore, whether either Mordecai or Esther protested or not, for the king was absolute and his will was law. We do not know, however, that they did protest or resist; and it may have been that they had become themselves so demoralised by the impure moral atmosphere of the place in which they lived as to count that an honour which Scripture teaches us to regard as the foulest dishonour; and it is when we come into contact with narratives like this, that we are most fully reminded of what Christ has done for the defence and protection of the female sex. Still, it does not become even us to be Pharisaic on this matter. We may not forget the astounding and horrible revelations made recently in London, which caused a shudder all over England and the Christian world; nor may we shut our eyes to the existence among ourselves of that which has been emphatically called "the great sin of our great cities." In some respects the state of things in Shushan was better even than it is in our modern Babylons, for those who had been thus dishonoured by the monarch were supported all through their after-lives by him, as secondary wives, while, alas! the victims of the seducers of these days are cast aside after a time, to sink down and down and down, until they become street waifs, with

scarce a remnant of womanhood left in them, and such that

> "The veriest wretch that goes shivering by
> Will make a wide sweep lest they wander too nigh,"

while few care for them in any respect, and least of all those to whom first they owed their degradation. We talk of Mormonism and its polygamy, and we cannot say anything too strong against that abomination whose rise and progress is the shame of our nineteenth century, but it were easier to deal with that if there was not this kindred wickedness in our own city life; and I earnestly lift up my voice in warning against the danger which all this bodes to our national existence. These evils are no better than those which we find here in Persia long ago; but with us they exist in spite of Christianity, and are emphatically condemned by it, while with them they were the legitimate results of the religion which they professed, and that makes all the difference. Let us therefore bring our Christianity to bear in this direction, for that alone will meet the case. Young men, I beseech you to set your faces as a flint against all such things, and let all those who are secretly indulging in iniquity of this sort remember that God will one day bring them into judgment with Him. It is a serious thing to poison the well-head of family life, and the frescoes of Pompeii explain all too well the downfall of the Roman empire. For your own sakes,

therefore, for the sake of the nation, and for the sake of Christ, keep yourselves pure, and beware of becoming in any way partaker of other men's sins, by allowing their wealth, or position, or respectability in society to condone for you the infamy of their sensuality. We turn with loathing from a murderer—why not from an adulterer? for the one is as really a breaker of the Decalogue as the other. It is not agreeable to have to say these things, but it is needful to say them, and I dare not keep silence.

On Esther's entrance into the harem, she found a friend in Hegai, the keeper of the maidens, and as the result of this abominable competition she was ultimately exalted to the place of Vashti. A great feast was given in her honour; but probably, because of his former experiences, Xerxes was more prudent on this occasion, for we do not read of any such excesses as those which issued in the idiotic order which Vashti refused to obey. But it is not safe for an Eastern monarch to disgrace one who has been at the head of his harem, and just after the account of his exaltation of Esther, we read of a plot which was made by two of his chamberlains against the life of Xerxes, and which it is probable had been concocted in the interest of Vashti. Be that, however, as it may, the existence of such a conspiracy was somehow detected by Mordecai, whom now for the first time we find "sitting in the king's gate" (an expression which simply implies [see chap. iii. 2] that he was

one of the king's servants), and by him it was communicated to Esther, who in turn told it to the monarch. The matter was considered of such importance that a special entry regarding it was made in the chronicles of the king's reign, and to Mordecai was given therein the credit of having been instrumental in saving the life of the emperor.

It is a curious insight which we thus get into the court-life of an Oriental despot, and there is little or nothing about it that is attractive in our eyes. Only two things stand out in this chapter to redeem it from unmitigated vileness—these are the love of Mordecai for Esther, and the reverence of Esther for Mordecai. How touching is it to read these words (verse 11): "And Mordecai walked every day before the court of the women's house to know how Esther did, and what should become of her." I think I see him pacing to and fro in the front of the prison wherein she was virtually entombed, trying to find some means of communication with her, and overjoyed if he could but catch one glimpse of her loveliness. "Every day" he came thus to satisfy himself, if possible, of her welfare, for his heart was hungry for tidings of her condition, and his home was empty of its former gladness. It is a beautiful picture, all the more affecting because of the background of selfishness and sin out of which it stands here in such distinct relief. And we have the companion to it in verse 20: "Esther had not shewed her kindred nor her

people, as Mordecai had charged her: for Esther did the commandment of Mordecai like as when she was brought up with him." It was a reproach then, as unhappily in some quarters it still is, to belong to the Jewish nation, and Mordecai was anxious that Esther should stand simply on her own merits, and should not be handicapped by her lineage, or hindered thereby from rising to the position which otherwise she might obtain. Nor was there any deceit in his advice, for, as Matthew Henry says, "All truths are not to be spoken at all times, though an untruth is not to be spoken at any time." But with Esther it was sufficient that Mordecai had laid his commands upon her to that effect, "for she did his commandment, like as when she was brought up with him." So the two were almost as father and daughter, and Esther, far from looking upon her new position as one of emancipation from the old obligation, continued to regard her benefactor with the deepest reverence, for she was sure that everything which he recommended was dictated by the purest affection for herself. These particulars were equally honourable to both, and they are touches of nature which, without any expository help, find their way directly to the heart of every reader of the narrative.

But now, before proceeding to the practical part of the discourse, let us look for a few minutes at the chronology of the chapter. The "levy" on the young women of the empire was made, as seems most

natural, shortly after the putting away of Vashti. But in the sixteenth verse we read that "Esther was taken unto King Ahasuerus into the house royal in the tenth month, which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign." Now, the feast of the former chapter was held in the *third* year of the monarch's reign, so that there are four years to be accounted for; and there would be considerable difficulty in filling up that gap in a satisfactory manner if we were to adopt the view formerly current that Ahasuerus is another name for Artaxerxes Longimanus, but if we identify him with Xerxes everything is plain, for during these years he was absent on his disastrous expedition against Greece. In his fourth year, as we know from other sources, Xerxes went on to Sardis, and in the spring of that which followed he set forward towards Europe. In the summer of that same year the battle of Thermopylæ was fought, and in the autumn his fleet was defeated at Salamis. Then, in the year after that, came the battles of Platæa and Mycale. Then he returned to Sardis, whence, after a sojourn of some little time, he went to Susa. Thus the whole interval is accounted for.

But in verse 19 we come upon another note of time which is more perplexing, for the date of the conspiracy against the life of Xerxes is there given thus: "When the virgins were gathered together the second time." The reference is not very clear, but it is probably an event which was generally well

known to both Jews and Persians at the time, and it seems to imply that, even after the exaltation of Esther to the place of Vashti, there was another levy made upon the maidens in the homes of the empire, similar to that which swept the orphan Jewess into the royal harem. It is too horrible to think of, but that, also, is verified by secular history, for Herodotus tells us that Xerxes sought solace for his terrible defeat in giving himself up to the grossest licentiousness. Ah, cruel lust! would that this had been the last levy made by thy remorseless tyranny on homes of happiness and peace!

Leaving now these repulsive matters, let us pause for a little and gather up some practical lessons from the whole subject.

And, in the first place, we have, in the conduct of Mordecai towards Esther, a beautiful example of thoughtful kindness. He was moved by the forlorn condition of the lonely orphan, and took her to his home, supplying her wants, giving her a suitable education, and training her in habits of obedience and piety. No doubt she was his cousin, but not every cousin would have done as he did. And therefore we cannot withhold from him our admiration. But how many Esthers there are in the world for whom there are no Mordecais! Orphanhood is a terrible privation, and there is no appeal so powerful as that which comes from a fatherless and motherless child. Do we know any such that are needing help,

and can we give them the help they need? If so, let the example of Mordecai stimulate us to do something for their support. We have orphan asylums, indeed, but these are not nearly sufficient to meet the cases which exist, and there is always room for individual effort. Besides, such personal beneficence is far better for those who engage in it than a mere subscription to an orphanage would be; and very frequently we come upon cases where those who are themselves little removed from the straits of poverty have been instrumental in doing a large amount of good. Not long ago there came into my hands the life of the Rev. Dr. David King, whose eloquence as a preacher was thrilling multitudes Sabbath after Sabbath in the Greyfriars Church when I was a student at the University of Glasgow, and I found this paragraph among the records of his pastoral experiences — an instance of energetic self-reliance that came under his notice which he used very graphically to recount: "A poor cab-driver had died, leaving a widow, elderly, childless, and unprovided for. At his first visit he found her in great affliction and anxiety, which he strove to relieve by temporary help and encouraging words. Calling again soon after, to see how she was getting on, and in what way he could best be useful to her, he was surprised, on reaching the door of her attic, to be met by a fragrant odour of cookery, and to be received by her with a bright smile as she stirred a

steaming pot upon the fire. 'I'm just making dinner for my lads,' she said, and he had scarcely time to ask an explanation before a sound was heard of hurrying feet and merry voices on the common stair, and in rushed a troop of boys, barefoot, some of them, and rather ragged, but all perfectly clean, with happy faces, and sure of a welcome. He watched with interest and wonder while they despatched their savoury meal and hastened off to their work again. When they were gone, he inquired the meaning of it all. 'Weel, sir,' she said, 'after you were here I was gaun aboot thinkin' what I could do, an' I saw a puir laddie stannin' at the corner of the street; an', thinks I, he wants a mither an' I want a son; what for shouldna we come thegither? An' there's mony mair in the same case; why shouldna I be a mither to as mony o' them as my bit rooms 'll haud?' She carried out her idea, gathering in from the street some half-dozen homeless boys, making it a condition that they should work and bring all their earnings to her to use for the common weal. With clean faces and with tattered garments mended, she took them one by one the round of her acquaintance in search of honest employment, which she was very fortunate in obtaining. Her plan was to keep a strict account of the money they brought in, and at the end of the week, if any surplus remained after all the expenses of her thrifty housekeeping had been defrayed, to allot it to the different boys, in proportion to their

earnings, and lay it by for their future benefit—thus wisely encouraging them in habits of industry and forethought. So these poor waifs found a happy home, and the forlorn widow a career of blessed usefulness." [1]

That is a wonderful illustration of what can be done even by the poorest, and I bring it out in this connection that we may all be stimulated by it to do our utmost in the service of our generation by the will of God. The deep poverty of that destitute widow abounded to the riches of her liberality, and like the woman of Zarephath, in sharing her handful with others, she found the old word made good, "The handful of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruise of oil fail." He who giveth thus to the orphaned and the homeless *lendeth* to the Lord, who makes both swift and sure repayment with added interest of blessing.

But, in the second place, we have here forced upon us the contrast between the palace of a heathen emperor and the cottage of a Christian peasant. What a hot-bed of intrigue, passion, selfishness, and iniquity this Persian court was! All the splendour of its architecture, and all the magnificence of its furniture, cannot hide the lasciviousness of which this palace was the scene, and yet this was the best the world could afford. Truly we may say, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity and vexation of spirit." There

[1] *Life and Sermons of David King, LL.D.*, pp. 66–68.

was no true happiness in it all. But now put over against this chapter, such a home scene as that which the Scottish poet has depicted in his "Cotter's Saturday Night," and tell me if its simple, rustic, cheerful piety does not dazzle into dimness the "mocking shine" of Shushan's gilded vice. And what principally and especially made the difference between them? What but that same "big ha' Bible," which lies open on the cotter's knee? Yet it is this Christian home life, with all its happiness and all its holy educational influences, that is in danger among us at this day. For the marriage union is the fountain of domestic purity, and few things are more sad in the condition of society among us than the easy frivolousness with which that sacred tie is broken by those who vowed to be true to one another "until death should part" them. But what is lightly made is lightly held, and if more thought and prayer were given to the selection of a partner for life, there would be less temptation to divorce. "Ah, me!" says Tholuck, "if our youth would but more deeply ponder what it is to choose a partner to be of one spirit and one flesh with them for the whole of their pilgrimage on earth, their choice would not be made in the false glare of a theatre or a ball-room. 'Till death shall you part,' would ring perpetually in their souls. In the light of day they would choose, and by the light of God's word they would try their partner, seek the advice of Christian friends, and not join

hands until they were sure of the Divine Amen."[1] These are the marriages which God will bless, and on which happy homes are built, and it is on the households of the people that the nation rests.

[1] Tholuck's *Hours of Christian Devotion*, p. 471.

IV.

THE FIRST QUAKER.

ESTHER iii.

NEARLY four years have passed since Esther was taken into the royal house, and Mordecai is still one of the confidential servants or chamberlains of Xerxes, and is daily to be seen with his colleagues sitting "in the king's gate." He has received no reward for his discovery and disclosure of the plot by which the life of the emperor was imperilled; and the whole matter seems to have been forgotten in the emergence of a new favourite, and his elevation to the highest office which a subject could hold. This man's name was Haman, and he is described as the son of Hammedatha the Agagite. That is literally all we know about him, except what comes out in this history, in which he plays a most conspicuous, and at the same time a most despicable, part. The word "Haman" is supposed by Rawlinson to be the Hebrew for Umanish, the Persian equivalent for the Greek Eumenes, and the term Agagite seems to be connected with Agag; which would appear to

have been a royal name among the Amalekites, like Pharaoh among the Egyptians and Cæsar among the Romans. What he had done to secure his advancement at the Persian court is not mentioned; but the fact that the king should have felt it necessary to issue an order that all his servants should reverently bow before the new vizier may, perhaps, be regarded as an indication that he was not in himself such a man as they would be likely to honour of their own accord; while Haman's own insistence on having such honour paid him, bespeaks the temper of one who had sprung from comparatively low degree. The other servants in the gate treated the matter with indifference, and obeyed the king's command. They reasoned, apparently, that it was no affair of theirs what sort of person Haman was, and that, as they were the king's servants, they would do as he commanded. But Mordecai felt otherwise. It was with him an affair of conscience, and therefore, as Haman came and went, he kept himself erect as a Quaker, and would make no obeisance to the great man. His colleagues reasoned with him on the subject, but it was to no purpose, and at length, to stop all further parley in the case, he said, "I am a Jew," and cannot do as the king has commanded. Upon this they reported the insubordination of Mordecai to Haman,—not to the king, you will observe, whose ordinance had been broken, but to Haman, who straightway went to his majesty and

complained, not of the conduct of Mordecai to himself, but of the peculiar customs and laws of the Jews, whereby, as he alleged, they were a constant danger to the State.

But on what ground did Mordecai refuse to bow to Haman and do him reverence? The only answer which comes clearly out of the chapter to that question is, that the position which he took was one that was common to him with all his people, so that it was sufficiently accounted for to others when he said, "I am a Jew." It was a matter of religion with him. But, that being admitted, the question still arises, what was there in such a command as this of Xerxes to offend the conscience of a pious Jew? Some have answered that, as the Persian monarch was regarded as an incarnation of Ahura-Mazda, and therefore entitled to divine honours, the act of prostration before him was understood to imply worship; and so homage paid to Haman as the king's representative would be a virtual giving of divine honour to a human creature. This is confirmed even by heathen writers — for Herodotus tells us that certain Greeks, on being pressed to prostrate themselves before the king, when they were introduced into his presence at Susa, declared "that it was not their custom to worship a man, nor had they come for that purpose;" and Curtius has said, "The Persians, indeed, not only from motives of piety, but also from prudence,

worship their kings among the gods."[1] Now, if that explanation be adopted, the act of Mordecai takes its place beside the refusal of the early Christians to sacrifice to the Roman emperor, and puts him on the honour roll among those whose rule of life in all such cases was, "We ought to obey God rather than men." But while it would fully justify Mordecai, this explanation is in itself not without difficulty. For did not Joseph's brethren make similar obeisance to him? Would not Mordecai after his own elevation to Haman's place be required to bow before the king? and must we condemn Nehemiah for rendering to Artaxerxes the homage which Mordecai here refused to Haman, though Xerxes himself had commanded that it should be rendered? It is possible, of course, that Mordecai was right, and that all the rest were wrong; but it is not absolutely incontrovertible that the reverence here required was of the nature of religious worship. Others, therefore, have sought for the reason of Mordecai's disobedience to the royal mandate in the nationality of Haman. Taking Agagite as equivalent to Amalekite, they remind us that the Amalekites were the first to attack the Israelites after their escape from Egypt, and that after his victory over them on that occasion Moses said, "The Lord hath sworn that the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."[2] They recall to our remembrance, also,

[1] See Keil on Esther, *in loco.* [2] Exodus xvii. 14–16.

the fact that it was for sparing some of the Amalekites that Saul was first rejected by God from being king over Israel, and that the only time that Samuel wielded a sword was when he "hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord."[1] Now if Haman was indeed an Amalekite, it would be easy to find in that a reason for Mordecai's conduct, as well as for Haman's purpose of revenge; for these descending feuds between races in the East are both undying and envenomed, especially when they are rooted in religious differences. But then we have no other case in Scripture where a royal title like Agag becomes a family patronymic, so as to be the name of a tribe; and it is hard to account for the appearance of one of the hated race of Amalek here, at this late date, in Susa. So there are difficulties connected with both solutions, and it is not easy to choose between them. Perhaps the first, all things considered, is the more satisfactory; and, without insisting that it is absolutely correct, we shall speak throughout as if it were the true hypothesis.

It is a little remarkable, as we have already noted, that his fellow-servants should have told Haman of Mordecai's conduct rather than informed the king, for it was a royal ordinance that he disregarded; but their action may be explained either by their knowledge that Mordecai was in all other respects distinguished for his loyalty to Xerxes, or by their

[1] 1 Samuel xv. 15-33.

desire to ingratiate themselves with the new favourite. Not less noteworthy is it that when Haman made his representation to the king, he said not a word about the personal slight which had so stung him into revenge; but pretended to be acting solely on public grounds, and with a view to the safety and welfare of the empire. The act of Mordecai was rooted in his nationality as a Jew, and therefore Haman "thought scorn" to take vengeance on him alone, inasmuch as the next Jew he met might repeat the indignity. So nothing would serve him but that the race should be exterminated, and to secure that end he made the following representation to the emperor: "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore, it is not for the king's profit to suffer them." Now in all this we have a most ingenious insinuation of falsehood under colour of that which was mainly true. It cannot be denied that the Jews were a peculiar people, with laws that were diverse from those of other nations; but it was not the case that, as a general thing, they did not keep the king's laws. For the things in which their laws were divergent from those of others were religious, and of such a sort as did not interfere with their civil allegiance; so that they were even distinguished above others for living quiet and peaceable lives; they paid their tribute without

giving any trouble; they complied with all the demands that were made upon them, except when these interfered with the injunctions of their God, and it was an atrocious libel on their character to affirm that they were on that account disloyal to the king or dangerous to the State. They were very particular, indeed, to "render unto God the things that were God's;" but they were also just as punctilious in "rendering to Cæsar the things that were Cæsar's;" and when the two came into collision, the difficulty arose not from their refusal to obey the king in all proper matters, but from the king's invasion of the domain of conscience, of which God alone is the Lord. One instance of the latter sort had galled Haman, and from that single case he drew the sweeping, unwarranted, and universal inference that they did not "keep the king's laws." The same declaration had been made regarding the three Hebrew youths in the time of Nebuchadnezzar, and regarding Daniel in the days of Darius, and the world has become familiar with it in the Christian centuries. It was the pretext for the persecution of the early Christians; it was the excuse given by Alva for his enormities in the Low Countries; by the kings of France in the dragonnades, and the massacre of St. Bartholomew; and by the Stuarts for their oppression of the English Puritans and the Scottish Covenanters, and in all of these it was equally false. It was not the persecuted that were in these instances

guilty of high treason, but the persecutors, and their disloyalty was to the royalty of conscience. They invaded a territory that is claimed as sacred by the God of heaven, and resistance to them there has done more for the cause of civil freedom than all other things in the world besides.

But Haman, though he knew that he was lying when he made the unqualified statement as to the Jews, that they did not keep the king's laws, knew also that he was safe—for the time, at least—in making such an affirmation, for there was nobody in the presence to contradict him; and the king himself seems to have known nothing whatever about the Jews, and to have cared less than nothing what was done with them. But Haman was determined not to fail, and so, when suggesting that they should be destroyed, he took the precaution of offering the king a large sum of money, amounting probably to between ten and twenty millions of our dollars, that nothing should be lost to the royal treasury by their extermination. This was all that was required, and so, with an appearance of impatience, as if the whole matter—though it involved the lives of many thousands of his subjects—was a "bore" to him, he virtually said, taking his ring from his hand the while, "There—do what you like with the people and their money too, and don't trouble me any more about them."

So far, Haman's plan seemed to succeed admirably. But now how was he to manage the details that had

been thus unceremoniously left in his own hands? Like most men of cruel and vindictive dispositions, he was very superstitious. It was therefore very important, in his estimation, that he should fix a "lucky" day for the execution of his purpose. And to get a lucky day he cast *Pur*, or *Purim*[1]—that is, he cast lots. He tried first for the day of the month, and it came out for the thirteenth; then he tried similarly for the month of the year, and it came out for the twelfth. So the massacre was fixed for the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. "Truly the lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing of it is with the Lord,"

[1] Concerning this, M. Dieulafoy, in the lecture already referred to, makes the following interesting statements: "This sentence (Esther iii. 7) presents no difficulty if one keeps to the literal meaning. It concerns a means of augury called in the Persian tongue *Pur*, which was thrown before any one desirous of taking the advice of fate. The *Pur* undoubtedly expressed its oracles by 'yes' or 'no.' Like the Egyptian gods, it must reply to very decided questions, asked in some kind of double manner. 'Shall the Jews be massacred on the first day of the month?' We know that, consulted day by day, month by month, the *Pur* gave a negative answer; then, when the thirteenth day and the twelfth month was called, it answered, 'yes;' that is, kill. Among the objects found in the deep excavation of the Memnonium (*i.e.* the palace at Susa) is a quadrangular prism, each side measuring a centimetre, and the length four and a half centimetres. On the rectangular faces are engraved different numbers—one, two, five, six. Throw the prism, and it must stand on an even or an uneven number. The Persians love games of chance as much as wine. May not the little Susian relic be one of their dice? And may not their dice, under the name of *Pur*, have been used to consult the fates and try fortunes?"—*Bibliotheca Sacra* for October 1889, p. 629.

for even the dullest reader of the history must see that if the lot had fallen in one of the earlier months, there would have been less time given to the Jews to prepare for the emergency, and little opportunity for Mordecai's taking measures for the counteracting of the nefarious design of him who is here called, so emphatically, "the Jews' enemy." Thus, as Henry says, "The lot broke the neck of the plot."

Acting on the indication given by the lot as to the lucky day of the month, Haman wrote his proclamation on the thirteenth day of the first month. It was written in all the languages—more than twenty in number—of the empire, and sealed with the king's ring, so that all might know that the name of Xerxes had not been unwarrantably employed. It authorised all to whom it came "to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, the thirteenth of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey." These, as it would seem, are the very terms that were used; and so we have appended to them, in the next verse, this certification of their accuracy, which in a modern history would have been given in a foot-note: "The copy of the writing for a commandment to be given in every province was published unto all people, that they should be ready against that day."

But when it is said, "The posts went out, being hastened by the king's commandment," we are not to suppose, of course, that there was in Persia at that time any such expeditious postal service as that which we now enjoy; and yet, for that age, it was exceedingly good, but only the king could take advantage of it. Indeed, it was one of the means used by him for the government of the empire, and was very largely, according to Herodotus, the device of this same Xerxes. Along the chief lines of travel he established, at intervals of about fourteen miles, post-houses, at each of which relays of horses and couriers were always in readiness. One of these messengers, receiving an official document, rode with it at his utmost speed to the next post-house, where it was taken onward by another courier with another horse, and in this way a proclamation like that here described would reach the farthest limits of the empire within six or eight weeks. Thus the letters were issued; and Haman was delighted, and the king was glad to see his courtier pleased, so that they sat down together in the palace to drink; but, with a suggestive contrast, the historian adds, "the city Shushan was perplexed."

It is time now, however, to look for some practical lessons from this history of pride and plotting and revenge. We have in the case of Mordecai an example of fidelity to principle which is worthy of all study and imitation. As I have read his conduct, he was

convinced that it was wrong for him to do homage to Haman, and therefore he would not do it under any pretence whatsoever. It was a small matter, in itself considered, that he was asked to do, but in this case that small matter was of such a nature that it marked the distinction between politeness and idolatry, and therefore he refused to do it. The difference between right and wrong may be shown in a little matter, but it is not therefore a little difference; and they who are determined to be thorough in their allegiance to God will make no distinction in their conduct between small things and great. Very noble, too, was Mordecai's firmness in resisting the entreaties of his fellow-servants, for he shut up the whole controversy with the simple confession, "I am a Jew." He advised Esther not to make known her kindred when there was no occasion for her so doing; but now, when the question comes to be, as he regards it, between committing sin and preserving his loyalty to God as one of the peculiar people, he has no hesitation in declaring his own. He will not needlessly publish his religion on the house-top, but neither will he be ashamed of it in the "king's gate." It might cost him much to make the confession, but he knew that sin would be still more costly, and so he did not shrink from saying, "I am a Jew." He had the courage of his convictions; and though he despised Haman, he was determined never so to act as that he should despise himself. Now, herein he gave an

example which Christians might follow with advantage. Have the courage, young men, when you are asked to do what you know to be wrong, to reply simply, yet sublimely, thus: "I am a Christian;" and when men see you are steadfastly-minded, they will leave off speaking to you. Add to your faith courage. By that I mean not mere physical bravery, but the far rarer quality of moral courage—the heroism, not of the warrior, but of the man who has learned to run the gauntlet of ridicule and scorn, and to follow the dictates of duty, "uncaring consequences." Nothing great or good in the world has ever been accomplished without that. Men may call you stiff-backed, Quaker, Puritan, Methodist, and the like, but even these very names may remind you that the mightiest power among men, next only to that of the Spirit of God, is the power of conscience; and that the grandest pioneers even of civil freedom have been those who insisted upon their right "to keep a conscience void of offence towards God and towards men." Hence, young men,—for it is to you especially I here address myself,—if you would worthily serve not merely this generation, but also those which shall come after you, you must learn to meet temptation with a direct negative, and master the difficult art of saying "No." Never mind though you may seem to stand alone; he who has God on his side is always really in a majority; and he who can say, The Father is with me, is never alone. Stand fast in your integrity, and let life go

sooner than your principles. If the world would have you do reverence to that which you believe to be detestable, let the world go; if the world would have you applaud when it is crucifying Christ afresh, be not ashamed of your nonconformity, but declare modestly, firmly, yet clearly and unmistakably, that you are a Christian, and that your homage goes to the Crucified, and not to them who are responsible for the crucifixion. Above all—and here I quote the words of the greatest wit of his age—"Learn to inure your principles against ridicule. You can no more exercise your reason if you live in the constant dread of laughter than you can enjoy your life if you are in the constant terror of death. If you think it right to differ from the times, and to make a point of morals, *do it*, however rustic, however antiquated, however pedantic it may appear; *do it*, not from insolence, but seriously and grandly; as a man who wore a soul of his own in his bosom, and did not wait till it was breathed into him by the breath of fashion."[1] Do it, let me add, like one who owes his whole self to Christ, and who is not ashamed to say, when the occasion calls for it, "I am a Christian." As we shall presently see, in our prosecution of this history, your adherence to this course may bring you into trouble; but that sort of trouble comes to an end, and the Lord will lead you out of it, while the trouble that results from the opposite course will be unending, for Jesus Him-

[1] Sydney Smith.

self says—and the words are all the more terrible as coming from His lips—"Whosoever shall be ashamed of Me, and of My words, of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when He cometh in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."[1]

But in the conduct of Haman we have a beacon of warning, which may be just as profitable to us as the example of Mordecai. The root of the evil in him was pride. Like most men who have risen from obscurity into an exalted position, not by their own ability, but by the gift of another, he valued his elevation not for the good he could do to others through it, but for the increased consideration which it brought to himself. It was more to him to see these chamberlains bowing in the king's gate than it was to have it in his power to help on good and great movements for the welfare of his fellow-men. He was one of those who valued office for what it brought to him rather than for the service which he might render through it alike to the king and to his subjects; and therefore when he was told of Mordecai's Quakerism he was exceeding wroth. A man of principle would have respected the conscientiousness of the act, even though he might have laughed at what he regarded the smallness of the scruple. A man of ordinary common sense would have treated the whole affair with indifference; but Haman valued his office just because it carried with it the right to such homage,

[1] Mark viii. 38.

and therefore what would have been a mole-hill, or hardly so much, to others, was a mountain to him. The proud man thus increases his own misery; and little slights, which other people would not so much as notice, are felt by him with great keenness. He whose arm has been recently vaccinated is very sensitive where the pustule is, so that a push which you would think nothing of is agony to him. Now, in precisely the same way the proud man is "touchy," as we say; the slightest infringement on his dignity wounds him to the quick, and when other people are laughing, he is vowing revenge; for, as this story illustrates, the passions are all near of kin, and one prepares the way for another.

Brooding over the refusal of Mordecai to do him reverence, it became so magnified in his estimation that he determined to punish it; there was revenge. That he might gratify that revenge, it became necessary to bring the peculiarities of the Jewish nation before the king, and he requested their destruction on the ground that they were not profitable to the monarch, whereas the sole reason why he suggested their extirpation was that Mordecai had slighted him; there was falsehood. Then, in planning their massacre, there was murder. Here, therefore, were four sins all in a line, each rising above the other in enormity—pride, revenge, falsehood, murder. People think, sometimes, that pride is no great sin; some almost speak of it as if it were half a virtue; but, as

this and other histories make plain, it is the germ of other evils that are worse than itself, and therefore we ought to be on our guard against allowing ourselves to become its victim.

And how shall we best counteract it? I reply, by cultivating a sense of responsibility. That which we have, whether it be ability, or wealth, or exalted position, we have received as a trust, and we are to use it, as stewards for God, in the service of our fellow-men. Let us keep pressing the questions, Who hath made me to differ from others? What have I that I have not received? For what purpose have I been entrusted with these things? And the more we ponder these, the less we shall be inclined to plume ourselves on our possessions, and the more we shall be stirred up to the service of our generation by the will of God. The cultivation of a sense of responsibility to God for our possessions, and the manifestation of stewardship to Him in the use of our means as His servants for the welfare of our fellow-men, are the great needs of our times. So far as I can see, they are the only things that will preserve us from the anarchy and revolution that Communism and Nihilism threaten to bring always in their train. As it is, the great ones of our time are a little too much like Xerxes and Haman here, who sat down to eat and to drink in the palace, heedless of the lives that they had just devoted to destruction, and altogether unconscious of the perplexity that was grumbling like the first

sounds of a volcanic eruption in the city and among the people. Unless all signs deceive me, there is coming upon us a conflict between property and Communism which will have to be settled somehow, and which will never be settled permanently until it is settled right. It is, therefore, suicidal folly for those who are wealthy to sit in luxurious self-indulgence in their palaces while so many are perplexed. If they would act wisely, they would take measures to prevent that conflict; and the scriptural means for securing that are the cultivation of this sense of responsibility for ownership, and the acting out of that in stewardship for God, so that they should say, "We are debtors" to our fellow-men, and will hold our means in trust under God for them. The Communist says, "Property is theft;" but the Christian replies, "My property is God's." The Communist says, "What is yours is mine, and I will take it by force;" but the Christian replies, "Nay, what is mine is God's, and I will use it as His for the welfare of my fellow-men and as accountable to Him." Thus, and thus alone, the capitalist will checkmate the Communist; and I would that I had the voice of a trumpet to cry to all of them over all the land, "Be stewards for God, and use your wealth for the benefit of your generation by the will of God. But if you are thoroughly indifferent, beware lest the perplexity of Shushan rise into the roar of an anarchy which will sweep everything before it in its reign of terror."

Pride will bring destruction; but the sense of such a responsibility as I have specified, stimulating to action, is the true conservative principle, and the only thing that will meet the case. God help us all to lay these things to heart!

V.

THE CRISIS.

ESTHER iv. 1-17.

EVIL tidings travel by express, and wherever they go they produce sorrow of heart. The publication of the decree issued by Haman in the name of Xerxes was followed by an outburst of grief, which, beginning at Shushan, spread out and out in the wake of the couriers, until it was heard in the remotest province of the empire. Naturally, however, this anguish was more keenly felt by Mordecai than by any other individual among the Jews. For he knew [1] the history of the plot. He could not hide it from himself that he had been the occasion of provoking Haman's diabolical revenge; and though he did not and could not upbraid himself for having done wrong in refusing to give homage to the new vizier, yet he could not but be peculiarly affected by this result of his adherence to principle. At first it would appear that he was so stunned, and almost stupefied, by the news, that he knew not what to do. He was cast

[1] See verse 7 of this chapter.

into the uttermost distress. He was like a vessel struck by a cyclone. He would get to the use of efforts to meet the crisis by and by; but, for the moment, when the hurricane first burst upon him, he could do nothing but give way to the violence of the storm. So he rent his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes; and, as no one might appear in such a garb of misery in the neighbourhood of the palace, lest, forsooth, he should mar the happiness of the monarch, he went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and bitter cry.

This conduct of his attracted the attention of the eunuchs, who were the only means of communication between the house in which Esther dwelt and the outer world. They probably did not know as yet the relationship between Esther and Mordecai, but they had long been familiar with their interest in each other, and therefore it was quite natural that they should tell her of his grief. When she heard their report, she sent raiment for him to put on, thinking, perhaps, that the matter was so unimportant that she might remove his sadness by getting him to put away its livery. But when her messengers returned and told her that he would not receive her gift, she was led to conclude that the case was more serious than she had at first supposed; and, therefore, she called Hatach, her most trusted servant, the head of her establishment, whom Xerxes had specially appointed as her attendant, and sent him to get from Mordecai a

full explanation of his distress. This opened the way, as Mordecai seems to have thought, to an escape from the danger by which the Jews were threatened. Therefore he told the whole story to Hatach, gave him a copy of the decree which Haman had issued in the king's name, and sent an urgent message to Esther, charging her "that she should go in unto the king, to make supplication to him and to make request before him for her people." From this it follows either that Hatach was already somewhat acquainted with Esther's nationality, or that he was now informed of it for the first time; but, in any case, he faithfully carried Mordecai's message to Esther, and was sent back by her to inform her kinsman of the gravity of the position in which she stood. She reminded him of the law that none were permitted to enter unannounced into the royal presence on pain of death, unless the king should hold out the golden sceptre to them that they might touch it; and she added that it was very problematical whether he would show such clemency to her, inasmuch as, for some reason, she seemed to have fallen into disfavour, and had not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.

This answer was exceedingly disappointing to Mordecai. He imagined that Esther shrank from undertaking the duty which he had urged her to perform, and that she was timidly preferring her own safety to the deliverance of her people. So he sent

Hatach back with another message, in which he gave her to understand that, while her life was only risked by her going in to the king, it would certainly be forfeited if the decree should be carried out; for, now that her Jewish birth was known, she could not hope to escape any more than others; and then, reminding her that her people were under special protection as the chosen of God, he pointedly implied that she might discover in this opportunity the reason why she had been so unexpectedly exalted to the place which she had been called to fill. "Think not with thyself," said he, "that thou shalt escape in the king's house more than all the Jews. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

This noble, patriotic, faithful, and believing appeal was not in vain. It brought Esther to immediate resolution; and, requesting that Mordecai and all the Jews in Shushan should spend the intervening time in fasting, while she and her maidens did the same, she promised to go into the presence of the king on the third day, no matter what the consequence should be to herself. "If I perish," she said, not in bitterness, but in the resignation of self-sacrifice—"if I perish, I perish."

It is remarkable that nothing is said here concern-

ing prayer, and some have spoken of that to the discredit of both Mordecai and Esther; but the fasting was in itself a prayer; for it was not a form put on from without, but the natural expression of the inner emotion, and, as an application to God, it is to be explained much as we do the touching of the Saviour by the woman, who in that way sought her cure. It was not so direct an appeal to God as prayer, but yet it was a real appeal to Him, and that was the main thing. Words are signs, just as fasting is a sign. That which is essential in either is genuineness. God does not look to the words in themselves, any more than He does to the fasting in itself. He has regard only to that which the soul expresses, either by the one or through the other. The touch of the soul of the woman went to the Master's heart through her touching of His garment with her fingers; and the yearning of the soul of Esther, through her fasting, made its appeal to Jehovah, even though she did not breathe His name. Nor did it plead in vain, for, as we shall see ere long, God was entreated for the people, and made a way of escape for them.

But now, turning from the history, which is in itself so plain as to need little or no exposition, let us see what lessons we may learn from it for our spiritual profit.

First of all, let us remember that we cannot keep trouble from our hearts by banishing the signs of mourning from our dwellings. It was the fiction of

the Persians that their monarch was a god. Hence his decrees were irreversible, and no emblem of sorrow was allowed to approach his palace. But all that was nothing better than a solemn farce, for the king was a man, subject to the common lot of mortals. No porter could turn back sickness from his door, or prevent the entrance of care or disappointment or unhappiness into the chamber of his heart; and at the appointed time, in spite of all the precautions of the chamberlains who sat in his gate, the rider on the pale horse would pass in and say to him, "This night thy soul shall be required of thee." But the same things are true of us. It is the height of folly, therefore, for us to try to surround ourselves with the appearance of security, and make believe that no change can come upon us. That is to do like the ostrich, which buries its head in the sand, and thinks itself safe from its pursuers because it can no longer see them. Trouble, sorrow, trial, death are inevitable, and the wise course is to prepare to meet them. We cannot shut our homes against these things; but we can open them to Christ, and when He enters He says, "My grace is sufficient for thee; My strength is made perfect in weakness." If we have the Holy Spirit in our hearts, He will bear us up under every affliction and carry us through every emergency; and such support through trial and death is better than exemption from either. To get God into the home is wiser by far than to seek to keep sorrow out of it; for the sorrow will come in

any event, but sorrow where God is never really harms a man, for He makes it the precursor of the highest joy.

Let us think, again, of the contrast between the earthly king, as here represented, and the true King of kings. How carefully the Persian emperor hedged himself in, not only from the subjects over whom he ruled, but even from the members of his household! No one dared to venture unannounced into his presence, save at the risk of life. But how free our access is, through Jesus Christ, to the throne of grace and Him that sitteth thereon! "In Him we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of Him." No matter who we are or where we are, we can get into the presence of God when we choose. In the closet, in the crowded street, in the railroad car, on the deck of the ship, or in the solitude of the mountain-side — in all time of our tribulation, of whatever sort it be, we can get to the ear of the Hearer of Prayer, in the full assurance that He will attend to our cry and give us that which He sees that we require. No recent application of modern science to the business necessities of our time is to me more remarkable than the telephone, by means of which we can converse with a friend who is to us invisible; and every time I hear it employed it seems as wonderful to me as it did before. But the earthly telephone is stationary; I must go where it is fixed before I can employ it. Here, however, in

prayer, I carry about within my heart a telephone through which at any moment and from any place I can cry right into the ear of God and get an answer from Him. Ah! if we but realised how true that is, we should not need to be exhorted after this fashion, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace." But, as it is, there are too many of us who act as if the way to the mercy-seat were as strictly closed as was that into the presence-chamber of the Persian king. Let us get rid of all such unbelief, and resolve to make full proof of the privilege of prayer; for the Church, I verily believe, has not yet discovered more than the merest fraction of that which this free access to God's throne implies.

But, in the third place, let us learn from the appeal of Mordecai to Esther that opportunity is the test of character. "Who knoweth," he said, "whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Here, to the pious kinsman of the queen, was the explanation of her exaltation. Now it was to be seen whether or not she would be true to the principles which he had instilled into her, and she was to pass into the order of heroines or to sink into the oblivion of failure. This was her "narrow place, where was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left." It was the tidal time of her life, the great opportunity of her existence, and the question was whether she would rise to the occasion and make it subservient to her greatness, or whether it would

sweep her away with it as weak, irresolute, and unequal to the emergency. Happily, she stood the test, and by her courageous self-devotion proved that she was worthy of the affection with which her foster-father regarded her. Character is revealed only by being tested, and that test often comes in the shape of sudden elevation. The common idea, I know, is that character is tested only by affliction; but I am not sure if prosperity be not a more searching acid than adversity. Here, for example, is a man living in a comparatively private position. His conduct, so far, is exemplary. His little failures are hardly worth mentioning in contrast with what is regarded as his general excellence. He seems marked out for promotion. And promotion comes, so that he is put into a place of public prominence and responsibility. But in that place he turns out an utter failure. Everybody is disappointed. Yet the explanation is that the new opportunity was a temptation, the strain of which sprung a leak in him, and thereby revealed a hidden weakness, the existence of which had not before been suspected. Hazael might have passed for a kind-hearted man if he had never had the chance, as men say, of showing his cruelty as a king; and in this connection who can forget the epigram of the great Roman historian concerning one of the vilest rulers that ever sat on the throne of the Cæsars. When speaking of the good reputation of his youth, he says, "An admirable emperor, if only he had never

reigned!" But there are others, like Esther here, whose true greatness had only been revealed by the opportunity which some critical emergency has given them. Such was Joseph in Egypt; such, also, was Daniel in Babylon, and such may you prove to be, if God in His providence should put you into similar narrow places. On such occasions, as well as in the case of the solemn event in connection with which the poet uses the expression, we may say with him, "the readiness is all." But that readiness is not to be obtained merely by wishing for it at the time; for character is a growth, and does not come to a man or a woman, ready-made, in the moment of urgency. The sublime opportunities of life, indeed, are the things by which character is tested, and these come only now and then to any of us, perhaps never more than once to some of us; but what that test shall bring to light is determined by the commonplaces of life beneath and behind that ordeal, just as here the character of Esther was formed by the daily training of Mordecai, and her improvement of it in the quiet times, when the thought of her coming to the kingdom had never entered into the mind of either of them.

Now, this is a truth which ought never to be lost sight of by any one among us. What we shall do in a crisis depends upon what we have been doing all along in the ordinary routine of our lives, when no such emergency was on us. We cannot cut ourselves

off from our past. There is a continuity in our lives, such that the habits which we have formed in the days that are gone do largely condition for us our resources in the present. Every day we live we are either adding to that constant element in us which constitutes our truest selves, and so increasing that reserve force on which in times of emergency we can draw with advantage, or we are expending with imprudent prodigality our spiritual capital, and living morally beyond our means, so that when a crisis comes we cannot stand it, and must inevitably go down. The careful man who husbands his earnings and stores them in some safe bank is able, when a time of adversity comes upon him, to tide over the difficulty by breaking in upon the surplus which he has accumulated. We all see and admit that in the case of deposits that are made outside of ourselves, and which are not *us* so much as they are *ours*. But we too frequently fail to take note of it in respect to the character deposits or drafts which we are constantly making on or from ourselves — meaning, thereby, our souls. When I was a student in the University of Glasgow I had a friend who was preparing himself for the medical profession, and who, on account of his proficiency, was made clerk to the Royal Infirmary of the city. He told me that as patients were brought in to that institution a careful note was taken of their former habits, and that in all cases of typhus fever or severe surgical operations he

could almost infallibly predict the issue from the facts which were then submitted to him. If the patient had been temperate and steady in his former life, and had been careful not to injure himself by excesses of any sort, it was, humanly speaking, all but certain that he would recover; but if he had been habitually intemperate or vicious, it was equally certain that he would die. He had overdrawn the capital of his constitution, and so when the emergency came there was nothing to sustain him through it, and he went down. Now, somehow similar it is with men spiritually. Our common daily life, whether we will confess it to ourselves or not, is either adding to our soul's capital of strength or taking from it. There is going on constantly within us a process either of invigoration and improvement or of deterioration and enfeeblement; and, though we may not think of it at the time, we are thereby either fitting ourselves for taking the tide of opportunity at the moment when it is at the flood, or for letting the occasion go past unimproved, so that we shall be left stranded on the rock of ruin. If, as each morning dawns, we meet every duty as it calls us, or face every temptation as it attacks us, as a duty to be performed, or a temptation to be resisted out of regard to the Lord Jesus Christ, we shall thereby add to our store of strength for the confronting of what may yet be before us; but if we go through our lives seeking only our own ease or the gratification of our appetites, or the

indulgence of some evil ambition, we are, in all that, only weakening ourselves, and making ourselves so much the less to be relied upon when we come into our kingdom, and have to face a time like that which Esther was here required to meet. Travellers tell us of a tree in tropical countries, the inner parts of which are sometimes eaten out by ants, while the bark and leaves remain apparently as fresh as ever, and it is not till the tornado comes and sweeps it down that its weakness is discovered. But the storm did not make the tree weak: it only revealed how weak it really was; and its feebleness was the result of the gnawings of innumerable insects through a long course of years. In like manner, if we let our characters be honeycombed by neglect of common duty, or by daily indulgence in secret sin, or by habitual yielding to some temptation, we cannot expect anything else than failure when the testing hour shall come.

What an importance thus attaches to what I may call the commonplace of life! We are apt, when we read such a history as that before us, to exclaim, "How tremendously important these grand outstanding opportunities of doing some great service are!" And no doubt they *are* all that we can say they are. But then we forget that the bearing in these of the individuals to whom they have been given will depend on the characters which they have been forming and strengthening in the ordinary routine life of every

day before they came into their kingdom. It is out of the commonplace, well and faithfully done, that the heroic is born; and the splendid devotion of Esther to the welfare of her people would never have been heard of had she not meekly learned and diligently practised the lessons of her girlhood which Mordecai taught her in his pious home. The prize-taker at the end of the year is the daily plodder all through it. The gaining of his diploma by a student depends, no doubt, on the manner in which he passes his final examination. That is for him the equivalent of this occasion in the life of Esther; but then the proficiency which at that time he manifests does itself depend on the steady, constant perseverance which he has maintained in his class work from hour to hour throughout his course. If he has been habitually trifling during all his years of college life, he will be rejected; but if he has been doing his work faithfully from day to day, from week to week, from month to month, and from year to year, his name will be found at length upon the honour roll. So, in the work of our common life, we are each day making or marring ourselves for the critical opportunities of our career. We are either prodigally draining away our soul's capital by sin, so that when we come to need it most we shall have none, and shall be like Samson shorn of his strength; or we are accumulating resources through faith in Jesus Christ and obedience unto him, on which we can draw securely in our time of emer-

gency. Do not, therefore, lose the commonplace in waiting for the great opportunity; but improve the commonplace by doing your best in it for Christ, and so you will be ready to take advantage of the opportunity when it does appear. I repeat it, and may God write it deeply upon all our hearts, it is out of the commonplace, well and faithfully done, that the heroic is born in the moment of opportunity. It is to the doing of that commonplace that God calls us now; and by our doing that we shall prepare ourselves for the manifestation of Esther's devotion, when, like her, we come to our kingdom and our crisis.

VI.

THE CRISIS MET.

ESTHER v. 1–14.

THE third day has come. But Esther does not shrink from the work which she has undertaken. It is with a palpitating heart, indeed, that she begins to array herself for her appearance before Xerxes. But her head is as clear as ever, and her woman's wit does not desert her. Not hers the fanaticism of those foolish people who imagine that, because they have appealed to God, they need use no means themselves to bring about that which they desire. Rather does she show the sincerity of her religious fasting on the two former days by the elaborate attention which she pays to her toilet on the third. It is little, indeed, that she cares for dress or ornamentation in themselves at present, for the fate of her people is trembling in the balance, and weighed against that they are felt to be less than nothing and vanity. Yet, just because of her devotion to her kinsfolk she is more than usually careful about her apparel at this time. If she has one robe which

Xerxes had praised more than all others, she will wear it now; if there be a bracelet or a jewel in her case which has specially endearing associations connecting it with Xerxes, she will put it on her now. Nothing must be left undone that can be done to please his eye and move his heart. Then, as the hour for her great enterprise strikes, she summons all her fortitude to sustain her through it. Calmness comes into her spirit with the need. The look of care passes from her countenance, and, putting on her "royalty,"—for so the word is,—majestic in mien, radiant in beauty, and smiling in loveliness, she makes her way to the end of the pillared avenue which led up to the throne of the emperor, and standing there, where he could see her at a glance, she waits the result of her application for an audience. Placid in external appearance, she cannot but be anxious within. Was she to be invited forward, or would she be consigned to the tender mercies of the executioner? She can hear her heart beat as she stands, and the moment seems an hour; but, oh, joy of joys! he has looked up and smiled upon her, and lo! the gilded sceptre is lifted from his side, and held out by him for her touch, as he exclaims, "What wilt thou, Queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be given thee, to the half of the kingdom."

These were formal words, not intended to be literally taken, but spoken after the hyperbolical fashion of an Eastern court. They are similar to

those uttered by Herod to the daughter of Herodias, and though in that case, as in this, the issue was serious enough, yet if the petitioner had gone beyond a certain limit, and asked for more than was considered proper, she would have suffered severely for her rashness. Esther understood all that. She knew also how undue haste doth often most seriously hinder that which it desires to further, and therefore she took time to tell her errand. Where another might have given way to impulse, and made a passionate appeal for that which was so near her heart, she, being now relieved from all anxiety as to her reception, calmly took her leisure, for "he that believeth shall not make haste." With sagacious forethought, in the anticipation of her propitious reception by the king, she had caused an elaborate banquet to be prepared. She knew how fond he was of banquets, and now she simply requests that he and Haman will honour her by coming that day to her table. I say she simply requests, and yet such an invitation was very unusual. For the custom was that the king and queen should dine separately in the apartments set apart for each, and the asking of another male guest who was not a relation was an almost unheard-of thing, which Haman would regard as a peculiar honour, and which the king would view as something done for his particular pleasure. It is possible that Esther may have formerly shown some dislike for Haman; perhaps it was because of that she had

fallen somewhat into disfavour with the emperor, so that now this invitation of his favourite would seem to him to be a virtual acknowledgment that she had been wrong, and that she had come at length to agree with him in his estimate of the vizier. We cannot tell. We know not how it appeared to Xerxes; nor do we know what Esther's real motive for asking Haman was. Probably she felt that when the crisis came it was important that the Agagite should be in the presence, and if her first intention was to bring things to a point that day, this will sufficiently account for her inviting him.

But if we suppose that she planned from the very first to have two banquets, one on each of two successive days, as she actually had, then this first invitation may have been designed to lull the suspicions of "the Jews' enemy," and keep him from taking measures to secure his escape. As I read the story, however, the former of these suppositions is the more natural. Esther had no other thought, when she gave the invitation, than that she would carry the matter through that day; and for the carrying of it through it was essential that Haman should be there. So Xerxes sent for him, bidding the messenger hasten him at once to the palace, and the two sat down to Esther's feast. Everything went well, and the king was even more complaisant than he was at first, so that he did not wait for Esther to enter upon her trouble, but, after he had feasted, he

opened the affair himself, saying again to Esther, "What is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed." It was all very gracious, and Esther, thus encouraged, began her reply: "My petition and my request is"—but there she faltered. Something occurred to make her change her purpose even at the moment at which she was about to carry it through. Either she felt that she was going to break down, and so could not trust herself to proceed, lest she should burst into a flood of tears, which she knew would be not a help but a hindrance to her cause, for that which she had undertaken to do required the utmost self-possession. Or she saw something in the face of the king which made her pause. Or she shrunk at the last instant from the dread ordeal, and felt that, after all that she had already gone through that day, she required some rest before she attempted more. But, however we may explain it, the fact remains that, after having just begun her answer, she faltered and changed her mind, so that, instead of exposing the plot of Haman, she contented herself with inviting the king and him to another banquet, which she would prepare for them the next day, and with promising that then she would make her business known unto the king. Now, whatever the motive or occasion for this change of front at the last moment in the heart of Esther was, the reader of

this history as a whole can see that her delay was of God, and that it gave time for the refreshing of the king's memory with his obligation to Mordecai for the exposure of the plot by which his life had been endangered, and thereby led up to special honour for the honest Jew, and peculiar mortification for the unscrupulous Agagite. It might have been a mere passing whim of Esther to put off the moment of excitement; but even of such a small matter as that God took cognisance, and it was one of the all things that wrought together for the deliverance of His people from destruction.

And now the banquet is over, and Haman leaves the palace with more haughtiness than ever. "What a mighty man am I! and who so much to be envied in all this empire of a hundred and twenty provinces? I have had the confidence of the king for long, and now at length Queen Esther has taken me into favour. How rapidly, too, I have advanced in her regard. I have banqueted with her to-day, and I am to be her guest to-morrow. Oh, fortunate Haman, thou art on the high road to glory, and there is nothing too lofty for thine ambition!" So, perhaps, he soliloquised as he moved along, but when he reached the king's gate, and the chamberlains rose to make their reverent homage before him, he saw the hated Mordecai sitting unmoved in his place, and that sight literally maddened him. What would he not give to make away with him where he sits?

To think that a contemptible cur like him should thus defy him to his face! It was infamous, and no punishment could be too great for such dishonour! But why should he make a disturbance now and stain the porch with blood? The thirteenth of Adar was coming, and then—and then—the dog should die, and all his race along with him.

Comforted (!) with such thoughts, he kept his hands off the Jew for the present. But it required an effort, for "he refrained himself." So he took his way to his home, but not with the same complacent self-conceit as he had left the palace, for Mordecai's stiffness had poisoned his joy, and like Ahab, when Naboth refused to let him have his vineyard, he went to his house "heavy and sore displeased." He called for his wife and his friends, and told them of all his greatness, his riches, the multitude of his children, the honours which the king had heaped upon him, and, above all, the particular regard which Esther had shown to him in her invitations for that day and the next—but, he added, with a scowl which seemed as if the thing which he bemoaned had made all the others of no account, "All this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate." Poor man! how little worth are all thy riches when a small thing like that outweighs them all? How empty are thy honours, when this slight dishonour drives them out of mind! How paltry thou art in thyself, when the conduct of

another towards thee fills thee with such unhappiness! Away with thee! thou pompous parasite! thou fawning sycophant! thou proud idolater of self! If there had been anything worth reverence in thee, thou wouldst not so have writhed under Mordecai's contempt!

But his wife was little better than the echo of himself. She could read him well, and, knowing what would please him best, she said, "What need you thus distress yourself for a Jew? Go, erect a cross there in your court, and ask the king that Mordecai may be impaled thereon to-morrow. After all these tokens of his favour, he will not refuse you this one more. Then, when you have crucified your enemy, 'go thou in merrily with the king unto the banquet.'" What? Merrily, Zeresh, after such a murder as that? Merrily? Ah, if thou didst but know who shall hang upon that gallows there would be no such word upon thy lips! But the saying pleased her husband, and the cross was raised, fifty cubits high. As he looked at it, he might say within himself (perhaps with a grim smile), "He shall be exalted enough when he is fixed on that." But not so fast, Haman, not so fast! There is another to reckon with. Man proposes—it is God that disposes, and the cunningest schemes of earthly plotters are often put to confusion.

But let us turn now and see what lessons we may glean for ourselves from this interesting history.

And in the first place, we have here an illustration of the fact that when the crisis comes, God gives His people grace to meet it. Undeniably, Esther was greatly upset when she received Mordecai's first message; and even when she sent back her servant to her foster-father with the report of her heroic resolution, there was that in her last words ("If I perish, I perish") which betokened that fear and trembling were in her heart. During her days of fasting, too, we may suppose that she looked forward with much trepidation to the moment of her entering in before the king. But, when the time came, God gave her strength to do her work, and she went forward to it calmly, to find that the way was clear. The Lord strengthened her to gather herself up for the crisis, and to hold herself, as we may say, well in hand all through. And that very composure lent a charm to her beauty which prevailed with Xerxes and won his smile. Now, this is far from being an uncommon experience with the children of God. That which in the prospect is most formidable turns out to be in the reality most simple. They go anxiously forward, distressing themselves with the question, "Who shall roll us away the stone?" but when they come up to the place they find it "already rolled away," and an angel sitting on it. It is not that there was no need for anxiety; it is not, either, that there was no necessity for prayer; but, rather, that in the supreme moment all cause of anxiety is

removed, and the prayer is both fully and speedily answered. When God asks us to perform some arduous or dangerous duty, we may rely that the way up to the duty will be made open to us, and that strength will be given to us for its discharge. That is a true word which is given to us through Isaiah: "I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them."[1] The blessing of Asher—"as thy days, so shall thy strength be"[2]—is made over to every Christian in the new promise to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness."[3] How often and in how many ways have these been made good to Christians in these days! It is a time of extremity; the enemies of truth are bitterly assailing the very citadel of the faith; and now a stand has to be made which shall determine the issue for years. The eyes of all humble Christians are turned to one singularly gifted man; all are saying that, like Esther, he has come to the kingdom for such a time as this. But he is full of anxiety and trepidation. At length he consents to lift the standard and enter on the conflict, and when the time comes he is carried away out of himself, and so sensibly helped by the Spirit of God that he sweeps everything before him on the resistless torrent of his eloquence. Or there is a terrible disease invading the frame; it cannot be cured, and

[1] Isaiah xlii. 16. [2] Deut. xxxiii. 25. [3] 2 Cor. xii. 9.

if let alone it will issue in a lingering illness and painful death. There is nothing for it but a critical surgical operation, and yet from that the patient shrinks. At length, however, the consent is given. It is to be performed on a certain day and at a certain hour. The meanwhile is given to prayer, and all the friends and relatives are requested, each in his own closet, to join in the supplication. Then, when the hour strikes, the diseased one walks with a strength that is not her own into the room, and gives herself into the hands of the surgeons, saying, "Living or dying, I am the Lord's." The shrinking is gone, the fear is subdued, and there is nothing but a calm heroism, which is the gift of God for the occasion. Or, yet again, a difficult duty is to be performed—a brother is to be expostulated with for some serious sin, or to be warned of some insidious danger. But we do not know how he will take it, and the question comes to be whether our effort to save him may not aggravate the danger to which he is exposed. Who will undertake the task? There is one who, of all others, seems to be the fittest; but the very idea of it fills him with anxiety. How shall he proceed? There is nothing for it but prayer; and in the faith that God will answer he goes forward. He finds the way marvellously opened. He has a most satisfactory interview. All his fears are dispelled —he has saved his brother! Who has not known of many instances like these? They are just as

remarkable as this case of Esther here, and they all encourage us to go forward to the crisis that is inevitable, in the full assurance that God will go before us to prepare our way and give us His grace to sustain our hearts. And they tell us, also, that when the last trial comes, and we shall be required to put off this tabernacle and enter in before the King of kings, we shall find dying grace for a dying hour. "These things," saith Jehovah, "will I do unto them and not forsake them." Even if we had not seen so many fulfilments of His word, it would still be our duty and our privilege to trust Him; but now that we have witnessed so many proofs of His faithfulness, who would think of doubting His promise?

But, in the second place, we may learn from what is recorded here of Haman, that when the heart is not right with God, a little matter will make a great misery. In spite of all his glory and all his possessions, Haman's happiness was poisoned by Mordecai's contempt. He thought that but for that one thing he would be perfectly happy. But, alas! he had made quite a wrong diagnosis of his case. He mistook the symptom for the disease. He did lack one thing for true felicity, but that one thing was not the obeisance of Mordecai, but a heart right with God. For happiness does not consist in the bearing of others towards us, but in the relation of our own souls to God. If Haman had possessed a right

spirit, renewed by the grace of God, the conduct of Mordecai would have cost him little thought. But with the self-centred heart he had, always worshipping itself, and always concerned about itself, even if Mordecai had done homage to him, there would have been something else which, like the dead fly in the ointment, would have made the whole unsavoury. There is only one infallible recipe for happiness, and that is the possession of a heart at peace with God and regenerated by the Holy Spirit. No matter what a man has, if he have not that, he will still be craving for something different from what he has, and as soon as he gets that it will lose its attraction for him, and he will cry for something else. Now, it is just such a heart that Christ promises to give to the believer, and in giving him that he puts a fountain of happiness into himself which will be independent of all external circumstances and influences. You may condemn the folly of Haman here, but until you have a new heart, such as Christ bestows, you may depend upon it that you are repeating that folly, in some form or other, in your own history.

And that leads me to say that the converse of my second lesson from this chapter is just as true as that lesson is itself. I have been remarking that when the heart is not right with God a little matter will make a great misery; but now I observe, as my third lesson from this history, that when a little matter makes a great misery, that is an evidence that the

heart is not right with God. I have the conviction that this experience of Haman's is far from being unknown among us in these days. I would not say that every man has his Mordecai sitting in the gate, and feels his happiness poisoned thereby; but there are many in whose cases things equally unimportant as Mordecai's lack of obeisance have made as much misery in their souls. Now, wherever that is true, you have something wrong with the heart. The person either has not discovered and appropriated the value of Christ, or he has for the time lost sight of all that the Lord is to him. When little crosses or cares or unpleasantnesses are looked at, as it were, through a microscope, and made to bulk so largely before our eyes that we can see nothing but them, we are just as bad as Haman was, and we need to revise our whole theory of life. If, like Paul, we can say, "to me to live is Christ," those mosquito troubles will not concern us much; but if they count for a great deal with us, and we act as if our whole happiness depended upon them, then we have reason to fear that our hearts are still unregenerate, and that our lives are devoted to our own ease and enjoyment, rather than to the service of the Lord. The "one thing needful" is a new heart, created in us through faith in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, and if we are harping continually on the lack of any other thing—whether it be Mordecai's obeisance, or Naboth's vineyard, or whatever else—

we are still in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.

Finally: it is a great misfortune when a man's worst counsellors are in his own house. If Zeresh had been a woman of sense, she would have talked to Haman in quite another strain than that which she adopted. Instead of inflaming his hatred of Mordecai, she would dexterously, and by the method of indirectness which every good wife knows how to employ, have turned his thoughts away from him altogether, and fixed them on the blessings in his lot which he had already enumerated. But, instead of that, she was vastly worse than he was, for he refrained himself, but she counselled immediate action, and the preparation of a cross, on which Mordecai might be crucified the next day. She was to him what Jezebel was to Ahab in sacred history, or what in the great drama of the poet Lady Macbeth was to her husband—the spur in his side inciting him to evil deeds, which perhaps he would never have got the length of devising but for her instigation; and, if all the truth were known, it might appear that she had been at the hatching of the plot which was to mature, as they supposed, on the thirteenth of Adar. As Dr. Raleigh has said here, "The truth is, women are the best and the worst. Because they can be the best, they can be the worst. Because they can rise to the highest in moral grandeur, in self-sacrificing love, in the things which bring human nature nearest to the angelic world, therefore

they can sink to the lowest, and when 'past feeling,' can be most like the angels fallen."[1] Here, then, is a beacon of warning for all wedded wives. Let them beware of adding fuel to a fire already burning far too strongly in their husband's hearts, as Zeresh did here. When they see those whom they love best going in the way of envy or passion or revenge, let them exert themselves wisely, yet firmly, to alter their determination. And let those husbands who have wives that are wise enough to see when they are going astray, and brave enough to endeavour to keep them from doing that which is wrong, thank God for them as for the richest blessings of their lives. A wife who is merely the echo of her husband, or who, as in the instance before us, only seconds and supports that which she sees he is determined upon, is no help-meet for any man. But she who has the clear eye to see the evil that is in his purpose, the strong love that would rather brave his displeasure than be a party to his wrong-doing, and the happy tact of leading him in the right path, while she seems only to follow—she is the woman whose "price is far above rubies." Happy is the man who has such a helper and who knows her value!

[1] *The Book of Esther*, by Alex. Raleigh, D.D., p. 129.

VII.

A SLEEPLESS NIGHT.

ESTHER vi.

THE banquet is past, and the night has closed over the city Shushan. In the house of Haman may be heard the hammering of those who, according to the decision of the family conclave, have been hastily commanded to have a gallows ready by the dawn for the execution of the stiff-backed Mordecai thereon. But in the palace of Xerxes it is far otherwise. There all have retired to rest, and there is nothing within or without to break the silence save the pacing of the guard to and fro upon his weary and monotonous beat. And yet, in spite of all the luxury that was about him, and all the silence that reigned around him, the king could not sleep. Powerful as he was, he could not compel that "sweet oblivion" to come at his command, and the repose which, unsought, had "steeped" the "senses" of many of his poorest subjects "in forgetfulness," refused to visit him with its refreshing unconsciousness, in spite of all the means he used for its allurement. We do not

know what caused his wakefulness, but such an experience is not so uncommon among ourselves that we need to seek eagerly for an explanation of it. Perhaps he had exceeded in some way or other at the banquet, and is paying thus the penalty of his imprudence. Or he may have been piqued by Esther's postponement of her request until the morrow into a curiosity as to what she could be taking such measures to obtain, which was worrying him because he could neither gratify it nor yet be content to wait for its satisfaction. Or he may have begun to revolve in his mind some new scheme of ambition, the working out of which would not allow him to sleep when otherwise he might have dropped over; and then, having thus banished his first drowsiness, he could not bring it back when he would gladly have done so. But at last he gives up all hope of slumber, and the question becomes "What shall I do to while away the tedious hours until the morning?" A common resource on such occasions in Persia was music; but that does not seem to have attracted him, and at length the thought suggests itself to him to have the records of his reign brought out and read to him—much as one now, in similar circumstances, might seek to amuse himself by the perusal of an old diary. Many things in these chronicles would be anything but amusing or agreeable to him, particularly the portions referring to his Grecian expedition, but, whether from design, or at the request of the monarch,

or, as men say (veiling their ignorance of all causes thereby), by accident, the reader chose that section in which was registered the great service which Mordecai had rendered Xerxes in the discovery and revelation of the plot which Bigthana and Teresh had concocted for his assassination. The rehearsal of this now almost forgotten incident led to the inquiry whether any honour or dignity had been conferred on Mordecai as a reward for his fidelity; and when he found that no such token of gratitude had been given to his preserver, he felt that he had been grossly neglectful in the case. It was neither seemly in itself nor politic in him to let such a service go unrecognised, and therefore he resolved that the matter should receive immediate attention.

Just then, however, he heard a stir in the court as of the arrival of some one eager for an audience, for it was now the dawn. He asked who the early-comer was, and being informed that it was Haman, he said, "Let him come in." The Agagite, it is not unlikely, had not slept much that night either; for revenge is a poor anodyne, and hatred is a bad bedfellow. So he had risen early that he might follow the counsel of Zeresh, and get Mordecai out of the way in time for his going "merrily" in to the banquet to which Esther had invited him. Therefore, before any one else was astir, he had come to ask that Mordecai might be impaled upon his brand-new cross of fifty cubits high. But the king knew nothing of all that, and, before

there was time or opportunity for the introduction of anything else, he accosted him thus: "You are just in time, Haman, to help me to decide this question: what shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour?" "Aha!" thought Haman, "here is some new glory that is designed for me, and, as it is left to myself, I will make it something that shall minister to my further promotion." So, in the full assurance that he was prescribing for himself, he said, "Let the royal apparel be brought which the king useth to wear, and the horse that the king rideth upon, and the crown royal which is set upon his head: and let this apparel and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that they may array the man withal whom the king delighteth to honour, and bring him on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaim before him, Thus shall it be done to the man whom the King delighteth to honour."

Had he asked these things avowedly for himself, Xerxes would have felt as Solomon did when he said to his mother concerning Adonijah, "Ask for him the kingdom also," for he would have seen that nothing short of that would satisfy his ambition. But the Agagite was not so foolish as to ask these things directly. He thought, however, that, as the king had consulted him apparently for some third party, while he really meant himself, he could put all that in without being suspected; and then, if he turned out to be

right in his premonition, he would be presented to the citizens of Shushan in the royal garb, and the procession would familiarise them with the thought of him as king, virtually saying to them, "Here, good people, here is your future emperor." It was thus a new scheme of his own, extemporized on the spot, for the attainment of the throne itself. It was not that he cared merely to have the garments and insignia of royalty for a few hours, but that he might thus formally propose himself as the next king, and that, too, under the guise of being honoured by the present. But how this airy castle would fade away like the mirage of an Eastern desert, and his heart would sink within him, when he heard these words: "Make haste, and take the apparel and the horse, as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew, that sitteth at the king's gate: let nothing fail of all that thou hast spoken." Was it possible that he had heard aright? Had it been for Mordecai that he had drawn out this splendid programme? Was he himself to be that one of the king's most noble princes who was to walk as an attendant at the stirrup of Mordecai while he rode in state, with the king's apparel on, through the city street? Was his to be the voice that should proclaim the words: "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honour"? Oh, it was a bitter dose to swallow! Had the man who was to be thus honoured been any other than a Jew, or, if a Jew, had he been any other than the hated

Mordecai, it would not have been so bad. But that such a triumph should be given to the one man whose refusal to do homage to him had taken all the joy out of his exaltation; that the programme for that triumph should have been suggested by himself; and that he should be selected to carry it out, was mortification indeed. Had he been planning for Mordecai all the time he had been thinking of himself? Yea, verily, that was the Nemesis of Providence; and yet, bad as it was, that was only one-half of the matter, for before long he would find that he had also been planning for himself when he had been thinking of Mordecai. The honour which he had designed for himself went to Mordecai, and the destruction which he had devised for Mordecai fell upon himself. The royal apparel was worn by the Jew, and the Agagite was hanged upon the gallows.

But we must not anticipate. Mortified as he was Haman had to carry out the royal mandate. There was no evading that; and so he went, with the best face he could, and led Mordecai through the city, while the people wondered to see "the Jews' enemy" in the place of lackey to a Jew.

When the procession was over, Mordecai, like the faithful servant that he was, went back to his post at the king's gate. His head had not been turned by the brief honour, nor his heart uplifted by the short-lived glory, for he was well ballasted, and his people were not yet delivered. But Haman went to his

house "in mourning and with his head covered." He could not look upon any one without shame, and he did not want any one to see that shame, so he covered his head to conceal his mortification. When he reached his house, he sent for his wise men —Magi, perhaps—and his wife, and told them all that had happened; but they were "miserable comforters," for all they did was to make articulate and audible the unuttered forebodings of his own guilty heart. They said, "If Mordecai be of the seed of the Jews, before whom thou hast begun to fall, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him." Wise men, indeed! But why did not Haman consult them sooner? Or why, if he so consulted them, did they not give him this opinion of the Jews before? We cannot tell; but now, at least, they are reminded, by the strange things that had happened to Mordecai, that the Jews as a nation had a peculiar history, and the fact that they still existed, in spite of all the efforts which men had put forth for their destruction, had, when taken in connection with Mordecai's triumph, convinced them that they were, so to say, "a people of destiny," and that those who assailed them would be ultimately overthrown. If such was their view of the situation, they were perfectly correct; but alas! the warning came too late to be of service, for it was like Daniel's reading of the handwriting on the wall, and it sent Haman away anything but "merrily" to Esther's banquet.

Now, in turning from this highly-dramatic story to seek for its practical lessons, we may say that we shall miss the great purpose for which it is here told if we fail to see in it an illustration of the working of God's providence. Note, in the first place, the minute universality of God's supervision and control. The notion of many is that Providence is concerned only with great matters. But those who so believe forget that perfection in anything cannot be secured without attention to details; and that great issues often hinge on apparently very trifling affairs; and such a history as this will show how true both these considerations are. A sleepless night is in itself no very important thing, but if, in the history of Xerxes, this wakefulness had come either the night before, or the night after, it would not have contributed, as it so apparently does, to the deliverance of Mordecai and the Jews from the plot of Haman. Again, it is a matter of little moment what a man shall do to fill in the hours of sleeplessness and keep himself from *ennui;* but if Xerxes had adopted any other plan than that which he followed, or if the attendant had chosen to read from any other section of the chronicles of the kingdom than that which he selected, there would have been nothing to recall Mordecai's services to the king's remembrance, and so there would have been no obstacle in the way of his granting the request of Haman for his execution. Once more: if Haman had not come to the court at the time he did,

and been introduced into the presence at the precise moment when the mind of the king was pondering the question what honour should be conferred on Mordecai, then the first word might have been his, and so the fiat might have gone out for the consigning of Mordecai to the gallows, even at the moment when the monarch was thinking about doing him honour. For it is not likely that Haman would have named his victim, any more than he had named the Jews when he procured the decree for their destruction; and so the order might have gone, and might have been so speedily carried out that the mischief would have been irreparable. Here, then, are four things, each of which is, in itself, almost infinitesimal to us—how much more to Him who is Himself the Infinite!—and yet, any one of them being different, the result could not have been obtained. But by the concurrence of them all the desired object was secured. Now, this history is not exceptional in any respect. It certainly is not exceptional in this particular. You see the same supervision of the most apparently trifling things by God in the biography of Joseph, and there are many striking illustrations of it in secular history. A change of wind from west to east is not a great matter, and yet on such a change as that, at a particular hour of a particular day, the history of Great Britain turned; for thereby the fleet of William of Orange was wafted to Torbay, while that of James II. was by the same means prevented from putting out to

sea to intercept its progress. Nay, take any critical event, either in the history of a nation or in the life of an individual, and you will discover that it has depended on the concurrence and co-operation of many smaller things, each of which might, humanly speaking, have been different, and the absence of any one of which would have made a failure out of what was truly a success. We understand therefore now, perhaps, a little better what the Saviour meant when He said, "The very hairs of your head are all numbered;" and again, "A sparrow cannot fall on the ground without your Father; be of good cheer, ye are of more value than many sparrows."

But note, in the second place, that we have here no interference with the operation of the laws of nature, and no infringement of the liberty of moral agents. We have no record of any miracle in this case. There is nothing supernatural in a man's having a sleepless night, or in his fixing on a certain part of his chronicles to read, or in the coming in of another person upon him at a particular juncture; and no single one of the actors in the case was working under compulsion—each one knew at the moment that he was following his own bent. We know this was so, for we have had parallel things in our own experience. Now, it was through these, and therefore through ordinary operations of ordinary laws, and through the free actions of free agents, that all this was secured. But it was not less the work of God, or less glorifying

to God, because of that. I will not undertake to make clear to you how God thus works through the volitions of moral agents, and through the ordinary laws of nature, without interfering with either; but that He does so I take to be not only the great revelation of this Book of Esther, but also the doctrine of the Scriptures generally; and I am sure that it is confirmed alike by observation and experience. Now this non-miraculous providence, if I may so call it, is a greater and grander and more glorious achievement of God's than it would have been if the same results had been accomplished through the direct forth-putting of His own omnipotence. A miracle is a work of power. It is done and done with. But such an operation as we have been tracing here to-night required something more than power for the carrying of it through. There was a deliverance wrought out for the Hebrews in their early history by God, but that, as we know, was effected mainly by miracle, and it was undoubtedly glorious. This deliverance of the nation in their later history, however, was equally wrought out by God, but it was not effected by miracle, and just for that reason I do not hesitate to say that it was the more glorious of the two. It required—I may say it reverently—more from God than the other. It showed more of God than the other, and, in particular, it gives us more of an explanation of our own daily life than the other. For it tells us that just as God was in and

over all these little matters here, so He is in and over all the details of our common experience; and he who has the eye to perceive it will discover in our ordinary existence a continuous working of God through the laws of nature and the actions of men, that is greater than the grandest miracle which was wrought through Moses. "This is indeed the great miracle of Providence, that no miracles are needed for the accomplishment of its purposes." I do not depreciate the supernatural; I believe in the miracles, and I believe, too, that they were meant for a good and wise purpose; but greater than all miracles to me is that providence of God, which, through ordinary laws in nature and common volitions of men, works out its purposes from hour to hour, and from day to day, and from year to year, through the ages, and which at length will be seen and acknowledged by all to be bright with glory and benign with blessing.

Now, if what I have advanced on this important matter be true, it may cast some light on the way in which God answers His people's prayers. There are those who affirm that to ask God to confer on us a physical blessing is to ask Him to work a miracle in our behalf. Even if I believed that, I would still ask Him for what I need, because He has commanded me to do so, and I would trustfully leave the method of His answer in His own hands. But I do not believe that to ask a physical blessing from God is

to ask Him to work a miracle in our behalf, and such a history as this of Esther confirms me in that non-belief. Mordecai and Esther appealed, in their own fashion of fasting, to God for help, and He did help them, but He helped them without miracle. He helped them through the ordinary workings of the laws of nature, and through perfectly natural and free volitions and actions of men. And thus I believe He will answer our prayers when we ask for such temporal things as He sees to be for our good. How He can do so I cannot explain; but to say that He cannot do so is to arrogate to ourselves omniscience; for if there be one thing that we do not know, it may be that very thing. Nay, more: to say that He cannot do so is to repudiate the teaching of this Book and to shut our eyes to the meaning of our own lives.

Then, finally, here, if what I have advanced in this connection be correct, it may tend to reconcile us to the minor inconveniences that come upon us in life. What an amount of fretting we do over little things! We go off our sleep, or we miss a train, or we have to wait for some tedious hours at a railroad station, or we approach the harbour in a fog and have to lie outside for a long while, so near our homes and yet so far from them, or a friend disappoints us and our plans are deranged. But why need I go on? Even as I am passing from one to another, you are yourselves recalling some of the unpleasantnesses

of last week and your impatience under them. Yet why should we be impatient if it be true that even these little things are taken cognisance of by God, and woven by Him for His glory and our good into the fabric of our lives? My friends, if, when we are disposed to be irritable over such tiny inconveniences, we could but pause a moment and say within ourselves, "This is all in the plan of God concerning us," we should at once have self-control. We might see, too, if we cared to look for it, some good purpose for which it was sent; and even if we failed to note any *objective* result that was thereby effected, we should still have to be grateful for the trustful patience which it fostered within ourselves.

So much time has been taken up by me in the unfolding of the providence of God, as illustrated by this narrative, that I shall linger now only to mention, and that but barely, two other practical lessons. First of all, think how valuable God's commonest gifts are. The proverb says that we never know the worth of the well until it is dry; and I fear that the same thing is true of more blessings than water. We know what health means, truly, only when we have lost it, and I fear that we must also say that we never fully realise what sleep is until we find it impossible for us to fall asleep. Now, as in this age of mental overwork this very sleeplessness has become a disease (called by the learned name insomnia), it may not be out of place for me to utter a warning against

those things which tend to produce it, for, when it once comes, it is hard indeed to drive it away and get back again to the repose of childhood. Keep your conscience clean, that nothing of guilt may put thorns into your pillow. Take no ambitious schemes with you to your couch, lest you should be constrained to lie awake in the attempt to work them out. Finish each day's business in its own day, that there may be no nervous anxiety in your mind about the morrow. Do not work, as a rule, far into the night. Watch over your table, and take nothing there that will make you restless. Above everything else, let Paul's prescription be your *only* anodyne, for all others are to be shunned as you would the plague: "Be worried about nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, make your requests known unto God, and the peace of God will keep your hearts and minds by Christ Jesus." Then, when you find yourself getting into a habit of awaking at a certain time in the early morning and lying awake for hours in the darkness, realise that Nature is ringing for you an alarm-bell, and stop right off, no matter at what cost. You have been working or living in some respects unwisely. Make it your business to find out what that respect is, and remorselessly alter your course; for sleeplessness is nothing else than the protest of your constitution against some outrage which you have done to it. Think more of this common blessing of sleep, and

see in that one of the richest tokens of the divine goodness which is not to be trifled with, but to be valued and enjoyed.

And this leads me, by a very natural transition, to ask whether you have ever reviewed your obligations to God for all that He has done for you? Xerxes utilised his sleepless hours in discovering wherein he had failed to meet his obligations to his benefactors. But what a benefactor you have had in God! Not only has He given you those common and ordinary blessings to which I have referred, but you have been the wards of His constant protection. He has given you all you have enjoyed. And when not your life merely, but your soul, was endangered, and your sin was calling for condign punishment on your head, He gave His only Son for your salvation. Xerxes's indebtedness to Mordecai was nothing in comparison to your obligation to Jehovah. Now let me ask, what have you done to Him for that? Will you allow yourselves to be outdone in gratitude by a heathen monarch, and that such a monarch as we know Xerxes to have been? Surely, if he felt that some recognition was due to Mordecai for delivering him from the hands of the assassin, you ought to honour God with the service of your whole lives for sending His Son into the world for your salvation. Now the question I want you at this moment to face, and which you do not need to put off until you have a sleepless night, is this: "How much owest thou to

thy God?" and how wilt thou meet that obligation? Here is Paul's answer: "Ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's." No mere temporary enthronement of Him for a day, or for a few hours of a day, will suffice. No mere giving Him the form of royalty over you for a little season will meet the case. "I beseech you therefore, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." Thus only can you honour God for all His beneficence and grace to you.

VIII.

RETRIBUTION.

ESTHER vii. 1–viii. 2.

IF the news of the morning which had seen Mordecai led in triumph through the streets of Shushan, with Haman as his lackey, found their way into the royal harem, as they probably did, they would so gladden the heart of Esther as to send her to the preparation of her banquet with good hope of her ultimate success in her intercession for her people. The elevation of her cousin, brief though it was, would seem to her the prophecy of the deliverance of those who had been doomed to destruction for his sake; and though there would still be some misgivings in her soul, she would look forward to the presentation of her request with more calmness than before, and that, of itself, would help to make it effectual.

With Haman, however, it would be far otherwise. The mortification which he had endured in being compelled to play the herald in Mordecai's procession, and the interpretation given to the Jew's exalta-

tion by his chosen wise men, must have greatly damped his spirits, so that he was in no haste to repair again to the palace. Not now does he congratulate himself that he alone of all the subjects of the king has been honoured with an invitation for the second time to banquet with the queen. Everything seemed to be going against him, and it is with dark forebodings of some inexplicable calamity that he now looks forward to that which aforetime he had counted an honour. Willingly, indeed, would he have remained at home, and when Harbonah came to summon him to the feast, he went with a dull and heavy heart. Zeresh told him, only yesterday, to get rid of Mordecai, and then go "merrily" to the banquet; but now that Mordecai had been so honoured by the monarch, he goes with ill-concealed misery and reluctance to the table of Esther. How great a change a few hours may make in the outlook of a man! and how universally appropriate the proverb is, "Boast not thyself of to-morrow, for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth"!

In the course of the feast, Xerxes, having the conviction that Esther's request must be one of some importance, renewed his kind assurance even more graciously than before, saying, "What is thy petition, Queen Esther? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? and it shall be performed, even to the half of the kingdom." And now that the critical moment has come, she meets it nobly. With-

out any fainting or feebleness, with calm dignity and majestic soberness, she makes reply: "If I have found favour in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request. For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my tongue, although the enemy could not countervail the king's damage." Mark how wise and how strong this presentation of the case is. She is not so excited as to forget the etiquette of the occasion. As Paul had words of courtesy for the most noble Festus and for King Agrippa, so here she begins her appeal with the politeness of a subject: "If I have found favour in thy sight;" and "if it please the king." Then, in the assured possession of the monarch's love, she puts herself in the foreground as one who had been doomed to death—"let my life be given me at my petition." Yet she will not be separated from her kinsmen in her plea, any more than she would have been in their fate; and so she includes them with her thus: "and my people at my request." And when she perceives the look of amazement on the countenance of Xerxes at the very idea of any one having presumed to condemn her to death, she proceeds to use language which would at once enlighten him as to her meaning: "For," she adds, "we are *sold*, I and my people," alluding thus in the most delicate way to the fact that Haman had

covenanted to give him ten thousand talents of silver for permission to destroy the Jews. She did not say that the king himself had sold them, but no doubt his own conscience said that for her. "We are sold, I and my people," "to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish." These are the very words of the hated edict, which had burned themselves indelibly upon her brain, and which accounted for the liberty which she had taken in bringing the matter before him. "For if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I would have held my tongue"—since, in that case, there would have been a possibility of at least partial remedy afterwards, and when righteousness began again to prevail with him, they might be redeemed. But if they were put to death, the evil to the Jews would be irreparable; and it would be impossible for any one to make adequate compensation to the king for the loss which he would sustain in the destruction of so many thousands of his most peaceable, most industrious, and most prosperous subjects. There is some little difficulty in giving the exact sense of these last words: "although the enemy could not countervail the king's damage." Literally translated, they read thus: "although the enemy is not equal to the king's hurt;" and some would paraphrase it as follows: "for it is not worth the king's while to trouble himself about the adversary." But the interpretation which we have given seems to us more in harmony with all the circum-

stances of the case. The wholesale destruction of a people, or their expulsion from a kingdom, merely on grounds of race or religion, inflicts a loss upon those who are guilty of it which nothing can repair. It would have been well if there had been some one to enforce that truth upon the rulers of France when they planned and carried through the Massacre of St. Bartholomew and the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes; for, when the Huguenots were banished from that land, they took with them the mechanical and manufacturing enterprise of the nation, and enriched other countries at an expense to France which has not yet been made up. All such Haman-like deeds are not merely crimes, but blunders; infringements of the laws of political economy, as well as violations of the sacred principles of liberty, and the damage resulting from them cannot be countervailed.

Esther's words, though they did not name any one directly, must have made it clear to Xerxes that she referred to the Jews; that she was herself a Jewess; and that Haman, the author of the decree which she had quoted, was the adversary whom she feared. But, though he probably did not need her word to assure him that it was so, he asked definitely who it was that she accused. "Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so?" And to that inquiry Esther answered, pointing, as she spoke, to the pale and crouching coward at the table with them, "The man, adversary and enemy,

is Haman: the wretch, this one." Such is the collocation of the words in the original, and the broken energy by which they are characterised is an indication of the depth and long pent-up strength of the emotion with which they were expressed; while the emphatic "this one" at the close must have pierced through Haman like a drawn sword, and been to him very much what Nathan's "Thou art the man!" was to Israel's king.

"Then Haman was afraid;" yes, and he had good reason for being so, for the king, to show that there was no hope of the success of any appeal to him, rose and went out into the gardens. That, as he well knew, was equivalent to his condemnation, and now his only resource was to get Esther to intercede for him. But, though he knelt before her,—Jewess as she was,—she was inexorable, and the king, coming in at the moment, taunted him with rudeness to the queen—not because he believed in the accusation which his words implied, but because "he meant to tax him with a further offence in not sufficiently respecting the person of the queen." Then he gave command, or the word out of his mouth, for his execution, and the attendant chamberlains covered his face and took him away. As they were going, Harbonah, who had been to Haman's house a short while before to fetch him to the banquet, and had asked for whom the gallows was intended which he saw there in the court, said very suggestively to the

king, "Behold also the gallows, fifty cubits high, which Haman had made for Mordecai, who had spoken good for the king, standeth in the house of Haman;" and the immediate answer was, "Hang him thereon." When a great man is going down, the meanest will give him a push, and if Haman heard Harbonah's words, he might have moralised a little on the question whether Harbonah's obeisance to him in the gate had been of any more value than Mordecai's refusal to do him homage. For Harbonah's supple genuflection had been nothing better than a "lively sense of favours to come," and now that he had gotten all that Haman had to give, he turned, like the time-server that he was, to worship the rising sun, even Mordecai, "who had spoken good for the king." So, as Mordecai got the honour which Haman planned for himself, Haman was hanged on the gallows which he had erected for Mordecai; and as his house was confiscated to the king, Xerxes made it over as a gift to Esther, who in her turn gave it to Mordecai, whom now she introduced to the monarch, telling him of his relationship to her, and of all that he had been to her, and had done for her, in the days of her orphanhood. The result was that the ring of office which he had taken from Haman was bestowed on Mordecai, who went to his couch that night the second in the empire. It had been an eventful day, fraught with terrible retribution to the unscrupulous Haman, and full of mercy to the

captive Jews. Let us see what we can take out of its incidents of wisdom and of warning for the regulation of our daily lives. And, in the first place, we may surely be stimulated to gratitude for the fact that we live under happier circumstances than those which are here described. What a tyranny that of Xerxes's was! That he should have had it in his power, from favouritism, or caprice, or for the sake of a bribe, to order the destruction of thousands of his subjects by one fell decree, was horrible in the extreme; and, though we can have but little sympathy with the victim in this case, it is no less appalling that he should have been able, without any trial or even form of justice, to order a man to be immediately executed. Where, in such a case, was the security for life or property among the people? And is it wonderful that when an autocrat of this sort has exhausted the patience of a long-suffering people by his intolerant and intolerable cruelties, they should seek to rectify one evil by the commission of another, and endeavour to remove him by assassination? We do not, of course, in thus speaking, extenuate the guilt of such an act, but we see how easily the commission of it can be explained in such circumstances. And we see, too, how grateful we ought to be that among us the law is supreme; that every one is equal before the law; and that the poorest among us has a right to a fair and open trial before he is visited with any sort of punishment.

And yet, though this is the theory among us, we must not shut our eyes to the fact that it is not in all cases carried out with absolute impartiality. Sometimes there is a miscarriage of justice which, to say the least, bears the appearance of being due to the political influence or pecuniary gifts of the accused or of his friends; while occasionally among the people themselves there is an outbreak of blind and bloody cruelty against those of other races which is worse than this plot of Haman's against the Jews, because it issues no decree and gives no warning to its victims. We are amazed at the old empires of Europe, at this time of the day, expelling the Jews from their territories, and we exclaim against the tyranny of the emperors and their advisers. But yet, within our own borders, the Chinese are abused in the most shameful manner, and there are those who would command them forthwith to depart out of our coasts. No doubt it is said that they are very undesirable people to have among us, and that for our own safety we should prevent them landing upon our shores. Well, that is a new principle for Americans to insist upon. It has been our boast in the past that we have invited the poor and the oppressed of all nationalities to come and enjoy with us the blessings of liberty. But if we are now to begin upon another system, then let us carry it through. Are all the European immigrants that come hither desirable people to have among us? By what test shall we secure that none but the right

sort of immigrants shall be admitted to our land? And if the wrong sort should be admitted, on what ground can we vindicate, before either God or man, their wholesale massacre in the midst of us? Whether is the coming of the Chinese among us or the existence of Mormonism in the country the greater danger to the State? And so long as we permit hundreds of Mormons to come among us every year, to be subject like "dumb, driven cattle" to the will of an autocracy that is set up here—an *imperium in republica*—more arbitrary and tyrannical than this of Xerxes, is it not ridiculous to make all this ado about a few Chinese? Then there is the treatment to which, in some districts, the negroes are subjected. True, they have been emancipated; they are being educated, and they are enfranchised as citizens of the Republic. But to what advantage enfranchised if they are shot down when they come to exercise their right at the ballot-box? I acknowledge that the problem of race as presented by the presence among us of seven millions of coloured people is a very hard one; but to make them voters and then to shoot them for voting is most certainly not the way to solve it. That not only murders them, but it murders the law; and bad as the former is, the latter is, I fear, still worse. If, therefore, we have any gratitude for our privileges, we must see to it that they be preserved, and must insist that the supremacy of the law shall be maintained, and that no one shall be condemned or

interfered with until he has had a fair and impartial trial. It is a great crime to kill—as twice within this generation we have seen killed—the highest executive officer in the land, but it is a greater crime even than that to murder the law, and we should see to it that those who are guilty of that are made by the law to suffer the penalty of their crime.

In the second place, let us learn that when we have an accusation to make against any one, we should make it in his presence. Haman imagined that his invitation to Esther's banquet was simply and only an honour to himself, but in the end he discovered that he was there to meet an accusation which she intended to bring against him. If he had anything to say for himself, then was the time and there was the place to say it; but the confusion that covered him, and the cowardice that characterised him, were abundant indications of his guilt, and the king himself, who had been, to his own shame, an unconscious *particeps criminis*, was a witness to the truth of what Esther had advanced. Now, in all fairness even to one who, as we think, has deeply wronged us, we should accuse him to his face and not behind his back. Let us say nothing of a man in his absence that we would not say in his presence. And if one is to be condemned, let it not be until he has first been brought face to face with his accuser.

In the third place, let us take note that there is a retributive element in the providence of God. As I

have already remarked, Persia, under Xerxes, was very far indeed from being constitutionally governed, and we cannot, especially in these days, approve of his ways of doing things. But yet, through these ways of his, God was by His providence securing that Haman should receive the reward of his own doings. He who, by the will of an autocrat, sought the destruction of a whole people, was by that same will consigned to death; and on the gallows which he had erected for the execution of Mordecai he was himself impaled. The Psalmist has said of some one in his day: "He made a pit, and digged it, and is fallen into the ditch which he made. His mischief shall return upon his own head, and his violent dealing shall come down upon his own pate."[1] And again: "The heathen are sunk down in the pit that they made: in the net which they hid is their own foot taken. The Lord is known by the judgment which He executeth: the wicked is snared in the work of his own hands."[2] While the Wise Man has generalised the law into this proverb: "Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein: and he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him."[3] The persecutors of Daniel were thrown into the lions' den, out of which he had been delivered; and Adonibezek was constrained in the day of his retribution and mutilation to say, "As I have done, so hath God requited me."

[1] Psalm vii. 15, 16. [2] Psalm ix. 15, 16.
[3] Proverbs xxvi. 27.

We all remember the ballad of Southey which tells how Sir Ralph the Rover, who cut away the Inch Cape Bell, perished with all his crew upon the Inch Cape Rock; and even secular historians have been constrained to remark on illustrations of the fulfilment of this law of Providence. Thus Macaulay reminds us that no man ever made a more unscrupulous use of the legislative power for the destruction of his enemies than Thomas Cromwell, and that it was by the unscrupulous use of the legislative power that he was himself destroyed. And Alison recognises in the death of Murat a memorable instance of the "moral retribution which often attends upon great deeds of iniquity, and by the instrumentality of the very acts that appeared to place them beyond its reach." He underwent, in 1815, the very fate to which, seven years before, he had consigned a hundred Spaniards of Madrid, guilty of no other crime than of defending their country, and this, as the historian adds, "by the application of a law to his own case which he himself had introduced to check the attempts of the Bourbons to regain a throne which he had usurped." Thus, often, in the words of the great dramatist, the engineer is "hoist with his own petard"; and we see that even in this life there is retribution.

But it may be said that, though this is observable in great matters and with great people, it is not found in small. And to that I reply that there is nothing small in the providence of God. We have seen, in

our exposition of this book, that it includes the smallest things; and Christ has told us that a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without our Father. No matter, therefore, how lowly may be our lot, or how limited may be our transactions, if we commit sin we may be sure that sooner or later our sin will find us out, and that our punishment may come in the form of some evil which we had planned for another. "Ashes always fly back in the face of him that throws them;" and, "If one will sow thorns, he had better not walk barefoot." Injustice, cruelty, wrong, of whatever sort, is a boomerang which returns to the hand of him who threw it; and we ought to exercise ourselves to keep our feet in the paths of rectitude and holiness.

But others may say that this law is not absolutely universal, and that there have been cases in which it has not been fulfilled. To that I reply that there are such anomalies in God's providence on earth, but the existence of these is only a reason for our believing that the retribution which has not overtaken the sinner here will surely come upon him hereafter; for then God "shall render to every man according to his works." This is a truth which, as it seems to me, needs to be proclaimed with particular plainness to the men of this generation. They dwell, with much unction, on the love and tenderness of God, and if they but took in the whole truth, they could not dwell too much upon it; but they forget the judicial aspect

of His government, and the terrible nature of some of His retributions. It is no kindness, however, to keep these things out of view. God's moral administration is retributive, and the wrong-doer must one day confront the wrong that he has done—nay, must confront the avenging God, who comes to reckon with him for the wrong. He *may* meet Him in some desolating stroke of His providence ; but, in any event, he *must* meet Him on His judgment-throne—and, unless he repent and return to God here, his appeal for mercy there will be as powerless as was that of Haman to Esther in the case before us.

IX.

A NEW DECREE.

ESTHER viii. 3–17.

IT had been a wonderful and exciting day. The guilty had been summarily executed, and the faithful had been signally exalted. Xerxes, therefore, would retire to his couch in such a frame of mind as would conduce to his enjoyment of refreshing rest, without the use of any expedient like that by which he had sought to beguile or remove the sleeplessness of the preceding night. But it would be otherwise with Esther, and I can imagine her lying long awake pondering what her next step should be; for she was in "a place where two seas met." On the one hand, the enemy of her foster-father and her race had been removed, and Mordecai had been promoted to the highest position in the State, so that there was now no danger either of his life or of her own. For these things, therefore, there would be gladness and gratitude in her heart. But, on the other hand, the decree which had been issued at the instigation of Haman remained in force, and, unless something were

done immediately, the thirteenth of the month Adar would see the destruction of her people in every province of the empire. The remembrance of that would fill her with anxiety, and the great question with her would come to be, what her duty was in the case. The work for which, as Mordecai had said, she had been brought to the kingdom, was still unperformed until the salvation of the Jews was secured, and she could not rest until she had done everything in her power for the attainment of that. But what was she to do? Xerxes had been very prompt in his dealing with Haman, but he seemed to have forgotten the decree, so that, left to himself, it was not likely that he would do anything more in the matter, and it would be too bad to ask Mordecai to make his first business with the king as grand vizier of a kind so personal and painful. There was nothing for it, therefore, but another application to Xerxes by herself, and that accordingly she resolved to make.

As on the former occasion, she presented herself unannounced to the king, and was relieved to see again the golden sceptre held out towards her. Relieved, I say, for she still took this liberty at the risk of her life; and while the tokens of favour which she had already received were encouraging enough, it was just possible that the monarch might take a sudden pique, and, saying within himself, "What, Esther again? this is getting monotonous, and must be put an end to," might utterly ignore her presence, and

leave her to be taken away by the chamberlains who had so unceremoniously removed the Agagite. But He in whose hand is the king's heart, and who "turneth it whithersoever He will,"[1] inclined the monarch to receive her graciously; whereupon she rose and said, "If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews which are in all the king's provinces." Mark here again the prudence of Esther, not only in the observance of courtly etiquette and in the arrangement of her plans, making all turn at last on his personal liking for herself, but also, and perhaps still more, in the adroitness with which, representing the decree as Haman's, she asks that it might be reversed. But in putting it so she had simply reminded Xerxes that the decree had been sealed with his ring and issued in his name, and so, by the constitution of Persia, it was unchangeable. Her request therefore, could not be granted, and perhaps it was because she saw as much in the countenance of the king, even before he spoke, that she fell down at his feet and besought him with tears, saying, "How can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?" But a reversal of the decree was

[1] Proverbs xxi. 1.

out of the question, and the monarch, as much concerned as it was possible for him to be, explained the matter fully to his pleading wife. He told her that his refusal was not owing to any displeasure with her, as indeed she might know from the punishment which he had inflicted upon Haman and the honour which he had conferred on Mordecai, but simply because, king though he was, he had it not in his power to reverse the writing which had been written in the royal name and sealed with the royal ring. Still, if by any other means short of reversing it, the effect of the decree could be counteracted or neutralised, Mordecai and she might write as they pleased and issue another proclamation through the empire in his name and under his seal.

It was the popular belief of the Persians that their king was God, and he had therefore to, at least, seem to be immutable. "He was required," as Rawlinson has told us, "never to revoke an order once given, however much he might regret it; never to draw back from a promise, whatever ill results he might anticipate from its performance. To maintain the quasi-divine character which attached to him, it was necessary that he should seem to be infallible, immutable, and wholly free from the weakness of repentance."[1] But immutability is very inconvenient

[1] *Five Great Monarchies*, vol. iii. pp. 225, 226.

In the lecture by M. Dieulafoy, previously referred to, I find the following modern illustration of this ancient Persian figment,

without omniscience; and so Xerxes felt it to be in the present instance. He could do nothing to revoke what he had already issued, and it was for Esther and her kinsman to devise means by which the evil might be minimised, and they had his authority to put these in operation, under his seal, in all his provinces.

It was noble in Esther thus again to put her life in jeopardy for the sake of her people, and it was generous in Xerxes to give *carte blanche* to Mordecai, but neither the nobleness of the one nor the gener-

which, as it would seem, continues to the present day: "The dogma of infallibility is the fatal consequence of the sovereign and almost divine power belonging to the true autocrat. Whoever retracts has been mistaken. The history of Persia proves that the Shah-in-Shahs (*i.e.* King of Kings, title of the Persian monarchs) never knew this weakness. Take one example from a thousand (it has the merit of being recent): Fat-ali-Shah reached Shiraz at the head of a part of his army. The royal caravan, surprised in a deep gorge by a snowstorm, was soon in need of provisions. The generals informed the Shah of the condition of the troops, and entreated him to order the breaking up of the camp. He refused, argued the perils of the route, and put off the start until the day when the snow should have disappeared from a neighbouring peak. Famine ravished the escort, already decimated by cold. Commanders and soldiers might die to the last one, still the sovereign would not modify his first orders. The courtiers were so convinced of this, that, instead of importuning their master with useless complaints, they sent the healthy men to the mountains, cleared away in one night the rock which the king had designated, and when the morning came claimed from the stupefied Fat-ali-Shah the order to depart. The snow was still heavy, the roads still dangerous, but the king could yield without committing an offence against his infallibility!"—*Bibliotheca Sacra* for October 1889, p. 631.

osity of the other is quite without a parallel in modern times. In the course of my reading lately in Scottish ecclesiastical history, I came—in the life of William Carstares, a Scottish clergyman, one of the favourite advisers of William III., and afterwards Principal of the University of Edinburgh, but, while William lived, almost constantly by his side—upon an incident which I do not hesitate to put upon a level with the heroism of Esther here, and which, therefore, I will take leave to relate in this place. It was in the year 1694, just six years after the Revolution, and before matters had been fully settled in Scotland, either in Church or State. William had issued orders that the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland should not be allowed to meet until its members had taken two civil oaths, which were justly obnoxious to them, even if they had been rightfully enforced. They held that the putting of this test before the door of the Assembly was just a repetition of that despotic interference with their ecclesiastical affairs for which the Stuarts had been dethroned, and the people of Scotland would not again submit to anything of the kind. They were greatly excited on the subject, and in imminent danger of breaking out into actual rebellion. When the king's commissioner came from London to Edinburgh to attend the Assembly, and saw the state of matters, he became alarmed, and immediately wrote to his majesty, putting the facts before him and asking further instructions. He sent the letter by a

special messenger, who was to return at once with the answer. At the same time, the clergymen sent a memorial to Carstares, earnestly requesting his interference with his majesty in behalf of the Church. When the express reached the king, Carstares happened not to be at hand, and, before he returned, the king, by the advice of two men who were not alive to the importance of the crisis, had written renewing his orders in the most positive and peremptory manner. Carstares returned the same evening, received and read the memorial which had been sent to himself, and immediately inquired into the nature of the despatches which had been ordered to be sent to Scotland. When he found out what had been done, he took it upon himself to go to the messenger, who had not yet started, and to demand from him in the king's name the papers with which he had been entrusted; and, as his position with the king was well known to all, they were given up to him. It was now late, but, knowing the urgency of the business, Carstares hastened to the king, and, finding that he had retired for the night, he insisted on being admitted to his bedchamber. The king was fast asleep; but, turning the curtain aside and falling on his knees, Carstares gently awoke him. His majesty asked what was the matter. "I come," he answered, "to beg my life." "Is it possible," said the king, "that *you* can have been guilty of a crime that deserves death?" He acknowledged that he

had, and then produced the despatches which he had taken from the courier. "Have you indeed presumed," exclaimed William, with a frown, "to countermand my orders?" Carstares begged leave to be heard only for a few minutes, and declared that then he would submit to any punishment which his majesty might think proper to inflict. The king gave him permission, and listened attentively to his statement; then, after a little while spent in thoughtful silence, he ordered him to throw the despatches into the fire, and draw up new instructions to the commissioner in whatever terms he chose, and he would sign them. This was done, and the messenger was commanded to use all haste in his return to Edinburgh, where he arrived on the very morning of the meeting of the Assembly, and just in time to prevent an outbreak which would have gladdened the hearts of the Jacobites, and might have put back the shadow on the dial of the land by more than ten degrees.[1]

But William could reverse his orders, a thing which, as we have seen, Xerxes was not permitted to do. So, as the next best, Mordecai prepared a decree, a copy of which is given in the eleventh and twelfth verses of this chapter, and which granted the Jews who were in every city liberty to gather themselves together, and to stand for their lives, to destroy, to slay, and to

[1] See Hetherington's *History of the Church of Scotland*, vol. ii. pp. 215-217; also, Cunningham's *Church History of Scotland*, vol. ii. pp. 192, 193.

cause to perish all the power of the people and province that would assault them, both little ones and women, and to take the spoil of them for a prey, upon one day in all the provinces of King Xerxes : namely, "upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar." It was a cumbrous way of meeting the crisis, but perhaps it was the only possible way ; and so far as it encouraged the Jews to act in self-defence, no fault can be found. Yet we shudder at the inclusion of the women and little ones in the conscription, and at the authorisation of the taking of spoil for a prey, though, as we shall see later, that clause was not acted upon. But we cannot look for the morality of the nineteenth century of the Christian era in the fifth century before Christ ; and in this aspect of the case the cruelties inflicted on the Jews—in mediæval centuries after the birth of Christ—are vastly more inexcusable than those which were authorised in this decree. But two wrongs do not make one right, and we may well be thankful that our lot is cast in better times than either.

The Provincial Office—if so we may call it—in Shushan had a busy time of it again while translations of the decree into all the languages of the provinces were made and the required number of copies was produced, for it was now past the middle of the third month, and it was of great importance that the document should reach the remotest boundary of the empire before the thirteenth of Adar. There

was no time to be lost either by scribes or by the couriers; and so the letters were sent by the swiftest possible means of transportation which was then in existence. The Authorised Version says that "they were sent by posts on horseback, and riders on mules, camels, and young dromedaries." The original words are very obscure, and the meaning of them is difficult to discover, but Rawlinson translates them thus: "and sent letters by riders upon coursers of the king's stud, offspring of high-bred steeds."[1] The Revised Version reads thus: "He sent letters by post on horseback, riding on swift steeds that were used in the king's service, bred of the stud."

After the issuing of the decree, Mordecai went out from the presence of the king "in apparel of blue and white, with a great crown of gold, encircled at its base with a diadem of white and purple,"—emblematic of his exaltation to the office which Haman had held,—and whereas, aforetime, "the city Shushan was perplexed" when the people read the edict that doomed the Jews to destruction, the sight of his promotion now filled it with gladness, and the Jews themselves had light and gladness and joy and honour. Nay, such was the effect produced by the new edict, that many of the people of the land became proselytes to the Jewish religion, for "the fear of the Jews fell upon them."

[1] *The Pulpit Commentary, in loco.*

Now, in seeking to turn the incidents recorded in this chapter to practical account, we may find some lessons affecting the three departments of the personal, the political, and the ecclesiastical.

And first, taking note of what is specially appropriate to individual character, we are reminded of the irreversible in human life. It was a foolish, inconvenient, and altogether irrational custom among the Persians that no decree, once published, could be repealed. And we can see in the case before us how, in order to get round that prohibition, imperial sanction was given to the maintenance, for one day at least, of a conflict between two classes of the people which actually resulted in much bloodshed. It would have been infinitely better, therefore, if the decree had been simply cancelled. But while all that is true—and we cannot but be alive to the injustice that was sure to follow from the observance of such a custom—we cannot fail also to be reminded that there is much of our own conduct which no man can reverse. The word once spoken cannot be recalled. The deed once done cannot be undone. The book once issued begins to exercise an influence which cannot be bottled up again, but which must go on operative for evermore. Ah, how many there are among us who would give all they have—would, indeed, part with a right hand or a right eye—if they could reverse some portion of their career. The man who in youth sowed "wild oats" cannot stop the production of the harvest

which has sprung from his folly. The hasty-tempered one, whose words sunk into the heart of a friend, and stabbed him with something keener than a poniard, cannot undo the mischief he has wrought. The author of a vile book may see his folly and lament it, and may do his utmost to recall the copies that have been issued; but so long as there is one in circulation, that will perpetuate the evil, and he cannot catch and confine the influence which it is exerting in those by whom it was read before they gave it up. You cannot stop the ball after it has left the gun. You cannot overtake an express train after it has started. If you shake the dewdrop from a flower, you cannot put it back again. If you rub the down from a peach, you cannot restore it to its place. These things are just as irreversible as a Persian decree. And in the same way no man can undo that which he has done. What manner of persons, therefore, ought we to be since all this is true? "Don't write there, sir," said a newsboy to a young dandy in the waiting-room of an English railway station, when he saw him take off his ring and begin with the diamond in it to scratch some words upon the surface of the mirror. "Don't write there, sir." "Why not?" "Because you can't rub it out." Ah, if we would only remember that we cannot undo or reverse or obliterate the past, how careful we would be as to our manner of life! And in this connection how powerful are the last words uttered by my dear

friend Mr. Gough! He had been bewailing, as he often did with bitter humiliation, the loss of those seven years of his life during which he had been the victim of intemperance, and had said that he would give his right hand if he could undo those sad, sad things. But they were irreversible. They could not be altered. "Therefore," added he, "young men, keep your record clean." Let me echo those historic words to-night: "Young men, keep your record clean." Lay not up for yourselves a heritage of unavailing regret in the years that are to come. Clog not the wheels of your future by the encumbering brakes of the past. Preserve the first fresh sensitivity of conscience; and, as the best means of doing that, begin and carry on your lives as the loving disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But in the second place, though the past cannot always be reversed, we may do something to counteract its influence. We need not sit down in despair or give ourselves up to indolence and regret. We may sincerely repent of it; we may have forgiveness for it; and we may be regenerated after it. We shall never be precisely as we might have been if we had never done the evil which we now deplore, but something may be made out of us still, and we may even be able to serve God in ways that might not have been open to us, save for the experience through which we have passed. You remember the lesson which Jeremiah taught his people from his visit to

the house of the potter.[1] He told them that while there he had seen the workman trying to make a vessel out of clay which was then upon the wheel. But the clay was marred, and he had to give up his original design. But he did not throw away the clay. He made it into something else, not so noble, but yet useful. And then the prophet represents God as saying to the people, "O house of Israel, cannot I do as this potter?" as if He had said, "You would not let me make you into that which I had first designed you to be, but if you will willingly submit yourselves to me now, I can still make something out of you." Now, up to a certain point, even though the past be irreversible, there is still this lower possibility before us. It may involve strife and agony and effort, just as in the case before us the deliverance of the Jews was not effected without conflict, but it can be done if we will now repent and return unto the Lord. Thus Manasseh in later life did much to counteract the evil of his earlier days. Thus Paul the Apostle, though he would never forget that he had persecuted the Church and wasted it, became the greatest missionary of his age, perhaps of all ages, and thus, to recur again to my departed friend, Mr. Gough's temperance triumphs helped to counteract the influence though they could not atone for the guilt of his early excesses. If,

[1] Jeremiah xviii. 1–10. See *Contrary Winds, and other Sermons*, by the author, pp. 150–168.

therefore, there should be those before me who are mourning bitterly over the irreparable past, let them not despair. There is hope for them yet if they will submit themselves plastically to the Redeemer's hands, provided they do so at once. For after the day of grace ends that possibility will cease. To-day, therefore, let them return unto Him, and He will make them yet into vessels, if not of honour, at least "fit for the Master's use." They may have to slay appetites, habits, lusts, besetments, as here the Jews had to stand against their assailants, but if they will only fight valiantly, trusting in His grace, they shall at last be more than conquerors through Him that loveth them.

But there is a political as well as a personal lesson to be learned from this chapter. It is that the happiness of the citizens depends upon the character of the rulers. When Haman was vizier the city Shushan was perplexed; but when Mordecai was exalted the city Shushan shouted and was glad. Now, it is the same with all civic communities still. "The wicked walk on every side, when the vilest men are exalted,"[1] and there is no calamity to a people that may well be compared with that of having unprincipled men in offices of trust. Again and again we have realised the truth of that statement in this city. It is not yet twenty years since we got rid of a band of robbers who, to carry out their dishonest plans, corrupted the

[1] Psalm xii. 8.

halls of legislation, and poisoned the very well-heads of justice in the courts of law, and now again, as it would seem, revelations are coming out which make all good men hang their heads, and dispose some thoughtful persons among us to ask whether our boasted democracy is not destined to be a failure after all. For the exaltation of Haman here, Xerxes was alone to blame; but then, when he found out his fault, Xerxes had no one to consult but himself, and so could send him at once to punishment. With us, however, the people are sovereign. Those who are in office are there by the will of the people, and ought to be amenable to their review. That is the true theory of our government, and in that true liberty consists. But then there must be true men to work it out, and the community must come at length to the acceptance and application of this principle: that a man who is morally rotten never can be really politically serviceable. He whose character is honeycombed with intemperance or licentiousness or dishonesty, ought to be for that very reason regarded as disqualified to hold office, either in the city, the State, or the nation. Now, to secure that, we need something higher than mere civil service reform, valuable as that would be. No competitive examination can gauge a man's morals. But where that is powerless, the moral sense of an indignant and spiritually-revived community is omnipotent, and *that*, through the evangelisation of

the people, and through the greater activity and prominence of Christian men in political primaries and conventions than we have yet witnessed, we *must* secure. It could be done if all Christian men of all parties were to take a united stand, and persistently to demand that it should be done. But as long as our boards of aldermen, of excise, of police, and so forth, are constituted as we know some of them to be, we cannot expect anything different from that which is now being brought to light, for, as the proverb has it, roughly but strongly, "You cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." But Xerxes is responsible for it all, and Xerxes is, in this case, the imperial people—that is, the citizens of the city, of the State, and of the nation. Until, then, you rise in your might and sweep out this Augean stable, and take means to keep it perpetually clean, the city Shushan must be perplexed and sad; but when you do that Haman will follow Tweed into his cell, and Mordecai will wear the blue and white of office, and the city will rejoice. But alas! alas! the Xerxes is asleep! Oh, for some valiant one to take the responsibility of awakening him, and showing him both what to do and how to do it!

But now, in the ecclesiastical department, we have this lesson, namely, that when the Church is on the top of the wave, many people are tempted to join it from unworthy motives. Such was the effect of the new decree which Mordecai had dic-

tated, that many from among the people of the lands became Jews, for the fear of the Jews was fallen upon them. Had the massacre been permitted to go on, according to Haman's design, no one would have cared then to have identified himself with them. But now that a Jew was prime minister, and that it was known that the emperor's favourite wife was a Jewess, the case was altered, and it was supposed that it would pay best to be of that community. So multitudes from these low motives became proselytes to the Jews' religion. With some, perhaps, it might be different, and the perception by them of the fact that the Jewish nation was under the special protection of God, and that no weapon directed against it prospered, might have had something to do with their conversion. But, as far as the majority were concerned, the change was dictated solely by self-interest of a worldly sort. Now, we see the same thing in modern times in the connection of many with the visible Church. So long as such connection involves ridicule, reproach, or persecution of any sort, there is reason to expect that only those who are sincerely devoted to the Lord Jesus will enroll themselves among His confessed people. But when it becomes fashionable, when identification with a particular church gives the entrée to a certain circle of society, or when it can be turned to account for the formation of a good matrimonial alliance, or the establishment of an excellent business connection, then there is

great danger lest the low motives which here impelled some from among the peoples of the Persian Empire to become Jews, will lead self-seeking and ambitious men to join its membership. Indeed, it is to be feared that there are churches among us which are held together more by such social influences than by anything else. It is "*the thing*" in some coteries to belong to them, and so people join them as gentlemen do a club. It is all wrong, and it will work tremendous mischief in the end. The true reasons why one should unite himself with a particular church are because, first of all, he is already united to Christ; because, next, the organisation and activities of that special church commend themselves to him as most in harmony with the principles of the New Testament; and because, finally, he is most edified and sustained by its ordinances and ministry. But to allow fashionable or worldly motives to intervene and become the determining elements, is to secularise the church by making it an anteroom of the world and so subordinating it to the world. One should be in that church where he sees most of Christ; where he gets most from Christ; and where he can do most for Christ. The church that is composed of such members will be blessed, and will be made a blessing, not to its own adherents only, but to all around. If it were true in Paul's time that he was not a Jew who was simply and only one outwardly, it is just as true now that he is not a Christian who merely joins the church

for the material profit which he can make out of it. But he is a Christian who is one inwardly, whose confession is not of the lip but of the heart, not of the letter but of the spirit, whose praise is not of men but of God. Such Christians all churches would welcome to their fellowship, but of the rest, the fewer any church has in its membership the better, for, though they may bring wealth, they do not bring worth, though they may bring worldly prestige, they do not bring spiritual power; and when a winnowing time comes they will but illustrate the truth of the Psalm which likens them to "the chaff which the wind driveth away." May God give us all in this important matter the grace of sincerity.

X.

THE FEAST OF PURIM.

ESTHER ix. x.

BETWEEN the twenty-third day of the month Sivan and the thirteenth day of the month Adar there was an interval of almost nine months. There was time, therefore, for the new edict to reach the utmost limits of the empire, and also for the Jews to make ample preparations everywhere for their defence. Of course, the nearer to Shushan a place was, there would be just so much the earlier knowledge of the purport of the second proclamation, and just so much the longer time for counsel and co-operation among the Jews in it; but not even in the remotest village on the frontier, in any direction, could they be taken unawares. And who may describe what a weight would be lifted from each Jewish heart as the decree was read? Had it not been published, it would have been impossible for them to act together, and their enemies, falling on them one by one, would easily have destroyed them. But now they were authorised to stand by each other and defend them-

selves against all comers, with the assurance besides that all the officials in the empire were on their side, civil and military alike, because now Mordecai was the prime minister, and a Jewess was the king's favourite wife. The change which the edict produced in them, therefore, was one from the darkest despair to the strongest hope. Yet they were not lulled by it into inactivity. They did not say within themselves "The danger is all over, for our enemies will never think to attack us in the face of this manifestation of the royal will, and we may therefore take no more thought for the matter." They knew better than to do that, for the other edict was still in force. Their enemies, therefore, might still fall upon them and show their malice and revenge by seeking to murder them, just because for that day they could do so without being interfered with by the authorities, and without subjecting themselves to the penalties of the law. It was a curious state of things. On the one hand, the antagonists of the Jews might attack them without incurring any legal penalty, and on the other the Jews might defend themselves by every means at their disposal without fear of interference. So there was a strong temptation to the former to take advantage of the immunity of the day for the gratification of their revenge, and there was the utmost necessity for vigilance and energetic preparation among the latter. It was a race quarrel, left for one day to fight itself out, in all the provinces of the Persian Empire.

The result was just that which might have been expected. Seventy-five thousand of the Jews' enemies were slain. The Septuagint reads "fifteen thousand," and it is well known that, because of the peculiar manner in which numerals were indicated in the Hebrew original, there is considerable uncertainty as to the Bible numbers. But the smaller of the two is terrible enough, while the larger is not at all beyond the limits of probability.

Now, concerning this dreadful affair, three things need to be emphasised. First: The Jews were not the assailants. They acted throughout in self-defence. That was all they were authorised to do by Mordecai's edict, and where they were not attacked they would offer no violence. Self-defence, however, is a law of nature, and they cannot be blamed for what they did; for, if they kept simply to that, their conduct, even by a modern jury, would have been styled "justifiable homicide." In the second place, they did not even go so far as the edict allowed them. Mordecai, taking his cue in this matter from Haman, authorised the Jews "to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish all the power of the people of the province that would assault them, both little ones and women, and to take the spoil of them for a prey." We should have thought better of Esther and her cousin if these clauses about the little ones and the women and the spoil had not been there. Perhaps they were legal forms of expression, and inserted as things of course,

without much thought of their significance; but their existence betokens a hard, stern, unrelenting, "measure for measure" sort of spirit, which does not commend itself to our approval—nay, let us say it positively, which is worthy of reprobation. But the people were wiser in this instance than Mordecai, for there is no mention made in the record of any hurt done to the women and children, and it is distinctly stated that "they laid not their hands upon the spoil." They would not have it said that they had enriched themselves with the property of their enemies. The spirit of Abraham was in that wise resolution of theirs, and by carrying it out they proved that they were his seed in a higher sense than that of the flesh. In the third place, it is not said how many of the Jews were slain. So far as the history goes, there might not have been one of them put to death. But it is scarcely possible that this should have been the case, for, in every place, they had no warrant to act until they were attacked, and the consequences of that attack, one would think, must have been the slaughter of many. In Shushan five hundred of their enemies were slain, and among these were the ten sons of Haman, whose names are written in the Hebrew rolls in perpendicular columns; and it is said by the commentators that the Reader of the book in the synagogue, at the Purim festival, is required to pronounce all the ten names in one breath, a feat which would require long-windedness of another sort than that which is the *bête*

noire of so many of the attendants at our modern churches.

And now we come upon an incident which staggers and perplexes us more than anything we have met with in this whole book. On the evening of the thirteenth of Adar, when the report was brought to the palace that five hundred had been slain in Shushan, the king exclaimed, "What, five hundred? If that be so here, what must it have been in the rest of the provinces?" but Esther seemed still troubled and unsatisfied; and, perceiving that Xerxes said to her, "What is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: or what is thy request further? and it shall be done?" In reply, she asked that the decree of Mordecai should continue in force for another day in Shushan, and that the dead bodies of the sons of Haman, who had been slain that day, should be impaled upon the gallows; and these things were done at her desire, so that three hundred more of the Jews' assailants were put to death in Shushan, and the ghastly sight of these ten corpses was exposed to the view of all the people. Now this strikes us as vindictive and revengeful—savouring a little too much of the spirit of Haman himself, and rather to be condemned than otherwise. At the same time, in justice to Esther, it must be said that she asked only the continuance of the permission granted to the Jews to act on the defensive; that there may have been reasons not here mentioned, which might

go far to justify her request; and that, except in the clause of Mordecai's decree which refers to the slaying of the women and children, we have no evidence otherwise of anything like the existence in her of a bloodthirsty disposition. It is just possible, too, that some of the fiercest assailants of the Jews on the thirteenth had escaped from their hands on that day; and that their proximity to headquarters might seem to her to make it necessary that they should be followed up and put to death. But, in any case, it must be confessed that the request here made by her to Xerxes has a bad look, and that, in spite of ourselves, it takes a large discount from the otherwise exalted estimate of her character which we were prepared to make, investing it with a stern, unrelenting hatred of the enemies of her race, which is not nearly so attractive in our eyes as the spirit of self-sacrifice and devotion to her kindred which was manifested by her when first the revelation of Haman's plot was made to her. But the Sermon on the Mount had not then been preached; and we must not insist on Christian morality at that early date. The record of her deed here is not an approval of her deed; and he must be very blind who does not see that the great truth, for the illustration of which this book has been preserved in the canon of Scripture, is that God carries on His work of providence through the actions of men, irrespective of the quality of these actions, and while holding each

to a rigid reckoning for his own conduct. Now the purpose of God was the deliverance of the Jews, and that was effected; but the result will not justify every deed that went to the production of it; any more than the blessings which the world has obtained through the crucifixion of Christ will justify the Scribes and Pharisees for putting Him to death. But, whatever may be said concerning Esther's conduct in this instance, the Jews rejoiced in their rescue; and it was counted worthy of constant commemoration. Hence Mordecai and Esther were only giving form to the desire of the people generally, in appointing a feast to be annually observed by them in every place on the thirteenth and fourteenth days of the month Adar, and to be called Purim, or the lots, because God, through the disposing of the lot for that far-off date, had given time and opportunity for the counteracting of Haman's designed massacre.

There has been much controversy between commentators of different ecclesiastical connections concerning this appointment; and it has been held by many to warrant the designation of special Church festivals, such as are to be found in some of our sister denominations; while others have not hesitated to say that Mordecai here acted under divine inspiration, and that his action is no warrant for those who are not so endowed. But the simple truth is that this designation of the feast of Purim has no bearing whatever on the question of Church

festivals. I see nothing in the history to warrant the view that Mordecai was inspired; but even if he were, this whole transaction was under the Old Testament dispensation, and gives no sanction for any similar thing to be done by any man whatever under the New. Moreover, this was not an ecclesiastical appointment at all. It was nothing better than a national commemoration, like our own Fourth of July, or, perhaps better still, our own Thanksgiving Day. There was a synagogue service connected with it, just as there is a religious service connected with Thanksgiving; but its great features were social gladness, and the sending of gifts to the poor, just as the same things mark the typical New England Thanksgiving. But there was no sacrifice appointment for it; and it stands on quite another plane than the feasts of the Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacle. Even, however, if it were on a level with them, that would not, as we have seen, be any rule for the New Testament Church.

It is still observed by the Jews of all lands, and the services connected with it are thus described by Dr. Ginsburg, who, as being himself a converted Jew, may be regarded as a competent authority: "The day preceding the festival—that is, the 13th of Adar—is kept as a fast day, and is called the 'Fast of Esther,' in accordance with the command of this Jewish queen; and sundry prayers expressive of repentance, humiliation, etc., are introduced into the

regular ritual for the day. If the 13th of Adar falls on a Sabbath, the fast takes place on the Thursday previous, as no fasting is allowed on that sacred day nor on the preparation day for the Sabbath. On the evening of this fast day—that is, the 13th of Adar—the festival commences, when all the Israelites resort to the synagogue, and, after the evening service, the Book of Esther is read by the Prælector. . . . As often as the Reader pronounces the name of Haman, the congregation stamp on the floor, saying, 'Let his name be blotted out,' 'The name of the wicked shall rot;' whilst the children spring rattles. In the morning of the 14th of Adar the Jews again resort to the synagogue, and insert several appointed prayers into the ordinary daily ritual. Exodus xvii. 8–16 is read as the lesson from the Law, and the Book of Esther as the Haphtara, under the same circumstances as the previous evening. The rest of the festival is spent in great rejoicings; presents are sent backwards and forwards among friends, and gifts are liberally forwarded to the poor. . . . The rejoicings continue on the 15th, and the festival terminates on the evening of that day. During the whole of the festival the Jews may engage in trade, or any labour, if they are so inclined, as there is no prohibition against it. So popular was it in the days of Christ, that Josephus tells us that 'even now all the Jews that are in the habitable earth keep these days festivals and send portions to one another,' and certainly its popularity

has not diminished in the present day."[1] It is regarded as the yearly Saturnalia of the Jewish people, an occasion on which excesses in eating and drinking were not only overlooked, but would seem to have received a sort of sanction and encouragement.

We are told that the decree of Esther, confirming the appointment of this feast, "was written in the book," and some have supposed that the reference is to the Book of Esther itself; but this can hardly be, for the decree is not given *in extenso* here, and the probability, therefore, is that the allusion is to some public record, such, for example, as the "Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia." As we saw in the outset of our expositions, there is nothing in this book to indicate with any certainty who its author was. But, whoever he was, inspiration altogether apart, he was a literary artist of no mean order, for there are a dramatic life and unity in his production—simple as its style is—which place it in these respects side by side even with the finest things of its kind either in sacred or profane literature. The exposure and defeat of the plot of Haman to massacre the Jews is the thread on which the whole is strung. Fittingly, therefore, it concludes with the appointment of the feast for the celebration of the deliverance of the Jews at that crisis, and the tenth chapter is a brief appendix, designed to let us know that at the time when the record was written,

[1] *Kitto's Cyclopædia*, edited by Alexander: Art. "Purim."

or rather, perhaps, at the date when the decree of Esther was finally established and accepted, Xerxes was still monarch of the Persians, and Mordecai was next to him, "and great among the Jews and accepted of the multitude, seeking the wealth of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed."

Now, in bringing this brief series of discourses to a close, we may draw a lesson or two from the establishment of the Purim Festival, which has been more immediately before us to-night, and then revert to the one great truth which the book as a whole so strikingly illustrates.

Looking, then, to the establishment of Purim, and viewing it simply as a national festival, we are struck, in the first place, with the historical value of a feast of this sort. We are living now at a date between twenty-three and twenty-four hundred years distant from that at which the events here recorded occurred, yet we can trace the existence of that feast all through these years. The Book of Esther is thus an explanation of the feast, and the feast is an attestation of the book. The same is true of the Lord's Supper in its connection with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. This argument has been elaborated by Leslie in his famous treatise, entitled "A Short and Easy Method with Deists," and it is too important to be lost sight of; but I cannot reproduce it now. Suffice it to say, that the rejoicings which are yearly indulged in by the Jewish residents of our own city are, in a

very true sense, attestations of the credibility of this narrative, while at the same time, like a float, they keep the truth which the book embodies from sinking out of sight.

For, in the second place, there is an educational influence as well as a historical value in such a feast. It is absurd to suppose that all the education of a child is comprised in what he receives at school. He learns much in the home, from the influence and example of his parents and brothers and sisters. He is greatly affected, also, by what he sees on the streets, and especially, perhaps, by the statues which have been erected in our squares and parks to the memory of our great men. Dr. Andrew Reed tells us how profoundly he was moved by the sight of the statue of John Howard, in St. Paul's Cathedral, London, and traces to that the benevolent purpose of his life, which ended in the establishment of so many asylums for orphans and imbeciles. So we ought to be careful what sort of men those are whom we allow to be honoured in that way. For every one who looks upon a statue is moved to ask "Whose is it? what was his character? what was his history? and why has he been honoured thus?" And the answers will be a part of the education of those who put the questions, stirring their ambition and firing their enthusiasm. Now, it is the same with national holidays. The Passover festival kept alive all through Jewish history the memory of the Exodus; and our

own Independence Day will evermore turn the attention of our children to the Declaration, the issuing of which that day commemorates. The observance of the birthday of Washington will keep his memory green; and Decoration Day, so long as it lasts, will be a memorial of the great price given by these Northern States for the emancipation of the slaves. Now, in the same way, Jewish children grew into the knowledge of this interesting section of their history, through the observance of Purim; and so a book which else might have fallen into obscurity among them has been kept in continual prominence before their minds. It was wise, therefore, for Mordecai and Esther to institute this feast; and they who are in public place as teachers of the people, ought to make our national festivals a means of furthering the education of the young.

But now, turning from the special topic of the evening to the book as a whole, I think you will be prepared to assent to my words when I say that it is a beautiful and striking illustration of the truth that God is in history. I do not know another narrative, unless it be the history of Joseph, which so impresses that fact upon the mind of the reader. It was not needful that the name of God should be introduced into it, because His hand is everywhere so manifest throughout it. But lest I should lose myself in vague generalities here, let me specify the things concerning the providence of God which in this book

are especially conspicuous. There is, first, its universality. It extends over all events in nature, and all actions of men. What, for example, could well be more trivial in itself than that a king should go past his sleep; and yet we saw how the occurrence of an experience of that kind led, along with other things equally minute, to very important results. There is nothing so small as to be beneath God's care, or so great as to be above His control. The very hairs of our heads are numbered, and a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without our Father. Nor let any one imagine that God's providence is only over what is recorded in the Scriptures. These narratives are given us simply as specimens of the providence which is over ourselves. God is as really working in and through the events of our lives as He was in and through those of the lives of Esther and Mordecai. The little things as well as the great things, the rough things as well as the smooth things, the bitter things as well as the sweet things—all are beneath the control of Him who doeth "all things well."

Then, in the second place, this providence does not interfere with the liberty of the agents through whom its purposes are wrought. It is, in fact, as really and perhaps as often wrought out through the actions of evil men as through the deeds of the holy. Xerxes here, though he was a selfish, sensual, indolent, and unscrupulous man, was an agent in God's hand for the working out of His will; and

even Haman was brought unwittingly to minister to the honouring of Mordecai. How all this is accomplished cannot be known without omniscience; but that it is accomplished is clearly illustrated in this book, and manifest to all who are intelligent readers of the history of the past, or accurate observers of the occurrences of the present. Therefore we may join the Psalmist in his assurance: "Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee: the remainder of wrath shalt Thou restrain."[1]

Then, finally, through this universal providence, God works out His special purpose for the good of His own people. The safety of His covenant people was here at stake—nay, the very fulfilment of His Messianic promises was here imperilled. If Haman had accomplished his purpose in securing the absolute extinction of the Jews, then there would have been no Christ any more than there would have been if Herod had been able to include Jesus in the massacre of the Bethlehem infants. But, through His ordinary providence, God accomplished the special object of His people's deliverance; and this enables us to understand what Paul means when, in regard to Christ, he says that He is "head over all things to His Church." God is in and over all events, that He may make all things work together for good to them that love Him. Oh, what a comfort that is to those who are "the children of God by faith in Jesus Christ." This is,

[1] Psalm lxxvi. 10.

indeed, the great lesson of the Book of Esther. God is on the side of His people, and sooner or later their enemies will be put to confusion. Let us see to it, therefore, that we are on God's side, and then no weapon that is formed against us shall prosper, and every tongue that shall rise against us in judgment He shall condemn; for "this is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord."

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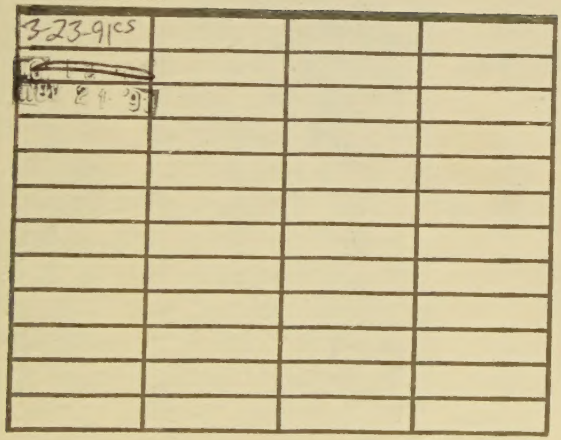

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